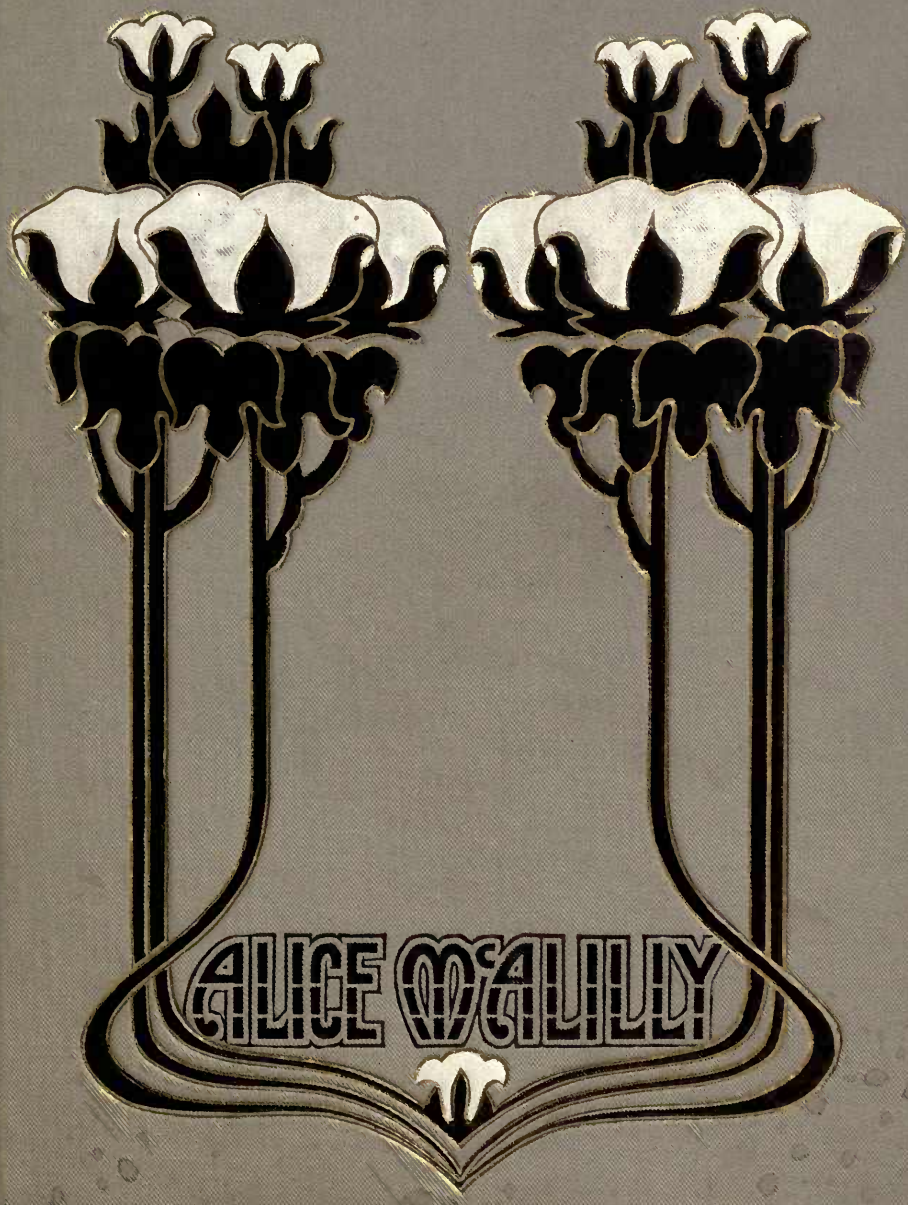


HILDA LANE'S ADOPTIONS



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Hilda Lane's Adoptions

By
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AND "HERCULES CARLSON"



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To
My Father

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Hilda Lane's Adoptions



I.

HILDA'S SECRET.

PROLOGUE

ONE afternoon in the thrilling sixties, just after the close of the Civil War, a handsome girl of twenty galloped a young sorrel up the by-road leading to the Lane farmhouse. Stopping at the pasture gate she slid down from the bare back of the horse, removed its bridle, and let it into the pasture, where it promptly kicked up its heels, whinnied to its mates, and gayly led an impromptu race around the field with a red heifer, a black mule, and two gray work horses. The girl ran lightly along the path to the house, where her mother awaited her at the kitchen door.

"I'm glad you've got home, Hilda," said the woman, eagerly. "The tin peddler's coming across the field from Hilton's, and I want you to fetch the rags from the garret. There's near fifty pounds, I reckon. We'd as well swap them for tin cups and pie pans, had n't we?"

"You come in and sit down in the rocking-chair, mother—you're all of a tremble. I'd get the rags down, but that is n't the tin peddler. It's Jim Ferril's chicken wagon, and we have n't any chickens to sell just now."

"Well, I'll declare. I thought sure it was the tin peddler. I guess I will sit down and rest a bit while you tell me what's going on at Mr. Payson's."

"Sakes alive, mother, you ought to see Jerry. He was n't home yet when I got there, but Lem Hall and Bud Simms brought him about ten o'clock. He looks worse than I thought he would. He had on a fine uniform, a new one they gave him when he left the hospital; but of course one sleeve flopped round where his right arm is off, and with one leg gone and one eye out it's hard to believe it is Jerry. Peggy choked up and nearly dropped little Lina when she saw him standing there on the front porch, with Lem propping him on one side and Bud on the other, while he held out his left hand to his father. I suppose Peggy was thinking of her husband, too, and wishing he had lived to come home; but I'd rather be poor Henry Strong, killed outright and done with the misery of it, than to be like Jerry, bound to live helpless the rest of his days."

"I do say, Hilda, it's mighty hard for Mr. Payson to have his only son come home from the army butchered up that way."

"Yes, it is. But Mr. Payson has such an unfeeling way sometimes. He yelled out, 'Why, howdy, howdy, Jerry! Looks like you're sort of cut up,

ain't you? Short a peeper and a couple of timbers, looks like! But golly, boy, I'm just as proud of you as if you'd come home with forty peepers and ten legs and arms! Think of that, mother, and poor Jerry trying to swallow his feelings the best way he could."

"Well, that's just Mr. Payson's way. He'd die off directly if he could n't talk more than is comfortable for folks. But how did Mrs. Payson take it? And how did you and Peggy act?"

"Why, I told you Peggy nearly fainted when she saw Jerry. She could n't look anywhere but the places where something was off, and her hand was as limp as cotton when she held it out to him. But Mrs. Payson did n't act like anything was out of fix with Jerry. She kept looking at his good eye, and leaned up close to his good side so he could put his arm round her, and then she pulled his face down to hers and kissed him steady for a minute or two, and all she said was, 'There's chicken pot-pie for dinner, Jerry, and plenty of it!' But she busted out crying then, and Jerry got white and shaky and he busted out crying, and all the rest of us broke down too—nobody knows what for."

"Well, it must have been a mighty feeling time for all of them, Hilda. I do n't know as I blame them for crying at such a time. Poor Mrs. Payson is n't one to say much, but she's deep-hearted and knew Jerry would understand how she felt without many words. She let out about the chicken pot-pie so he'd know she remembered his favorite dish, and

sort of spoke her feelings that way. But you have n't let on how you acted yet, but seeing that you 're only a neighbor girl—"

"Do n't talk that way, mother. You know I felt bad enough. I did n't show myself till Jerry's own folks got done making him welcome."

"What did you say then?"

"I have n't anything to brag on. I felt terrible, but I did n't act as I felt. I tried to look cheerful when I took hold of Jerry's hand and said, 'I'm mighty glad you've got home again, Jerry. It has n't been so pleasant since you went away.'"

"What did Jerry say to that?"

"Sakes alive, mother, you're dreadful curious, are n't you? I do n't remember just what he did say, but he gave my hand a yank that made me squirm because of my rings being on that hand. You have n't forgotten that Jerry made both of these rings, have you? He made the black one out of a button and the silver one out of a dime the last year we were both in school. He was handy with his knife then, but he's done with all that now."

"Yes, I reckon so, poor fellow. But speaking of the last year you went to school makes me think of a thing I've wanted to talk to you about, Hilda. I've got a feeling that your father and me did n't do right in taking you out of school when we did. You never did have much chance at the best when you were growing up, having to stay out to help with the fall and spring work every year. You was smart, though, and learned fast when you did have

a chance, if I do say it. But your father started poor, and set out to get well fixed before he died—and he did. When a *Lane* sets out to do a thing it's bound to be done; but your father killed himself off with hard work, and me too nearly, besides spoiling your chance to be something more than a farmer girl. Well, poor man, he got things fixed about as he wanted them at last, but too late to do him much good. He left us full-handed, Hilda; and now the war's over and things are settling down again I want you to spunk up and go off to school—to college or wherever you'd like. You are n't too old to learn a heap yet. I used to think you and Jerry Payson were going to make a hitch of it, but now he's come home from the army in such a fix I reckon he'll have to give up getting married for good and all. No girl in her senses would want him now, that about half of him is in the grave. Now what are you crying that way for, Hilda?"

"Sakes alive, mother, I can't bear to hear you talk so cold-hearted about Jerry. He'd be worth more than a dozen others if both of his legs and arms were off!"

"Hilda, Hilda, I was afraid things were that way with you. But I'll be plain-spoken—I'd hate to see you marry Jerry the way he is now. Why, your father would sit up in his grave and fight against it if he knew it."

"I reckon there won't be any call for him to sit up in his grave on that account. Not but what I'd have Jerry quick enough if he'd ask me."

"Land o' mercy, Hilda, it is n't hardly modest for a girl to talk that way!"

"I do n't know as a body ought to say that it is n't modest for a girl to tell her own mother how she feels."

"Well, I suppose not. Then it was on Jerry's account that you gave the mitten to Andy Peters and Bud Sims and Lem Hall? You would have done well to take Lem—he'll be full-handed when the old folks die off."

"When a body is picking a husband there's things to think of besides money, mother. I loved Jerry—I do yet."

"But did n't Jerry ever come to the point when he was galavanting round with you to singing-schools and apple-peelings, and sitting up in the front room with you of Sunday nights?"

"He never said anything right out till the night before he went off to the army."

"What did he say then, Hilda? I'd like to know how he made out to get to the point at last."

"Sakes alive, mother, you're mighty particular. I reckon there's no harm in telling, but it is n't easy. He had come over to tell me good-bye, and we were sitting on the front steps when he said, 'There's just one thing that makes me hate to go off to the army, Hilda—I'm afraid you'll forget me.' 'O, I guess not,' I said. 'Maybe you'll be married by the time I get back,' he said. 'No danger of that,' I said. Well, then Jerry got hold of my hand, and—well, after a while he laughed a little and said, 'You'll

get married mighty quick after I get back if I have my way about it.' Well, just then Andy Peters came around the corner of the house and lopped down on the steps, and there he staid for want of better sense. Jerry had to make the start home at last, but after they had got down to the road he came running back, and says he: 'Andy spoilt our talk, Hilda; but I won't go without telling you that I love you. I won't tie you up to any promise, but I'll send you a gold ring as soon as I can get one, and if you love me and are willing to marry me when I get back, why you just be wearing that gold ring the first time I see you after the war is over.' Well, that tormenting Andy Peters had followed back by that time, and all I could do was to squeeze Jerry's hand and said good-bye."

"Did the gold ring ever come?"

"No; and never a word to tell why. But Jerry was n't the one to say a thing he did n't mean, and I know there was a mighty good reason of some sort that hindered him. Of course, I can't ask him about it; I'd die first, and it is n't likely he'll ever say marry to me or any one else now. But in spite of the sin of it, I can't help believing that Andy Peters is at the bottom of things. Do n't you remember how he kept coming to see me every Sunday after Jerry went away? And how he *would* bring our mail every day in the face of my wishes? Well, mother, he asked me to have him time and time again, till I got so provoked at last that I told him I would n't marry him if he was the only man on earth. He got

flaming mad then, and swore he knew who was between him and me, and that he was going off and join the rebel army just to get a chance and the *right* to shoot Jerry Payson. I knew he was with the South in heart, but I did n't think he would be such a fool as to join the rebel army, but he did. Lem Hall got a letter from him yesterday, and he's coming home this week. I should think he would be ashamed to show his face around here. But, sakes alive, he has n't any feelings to speak of."

"Do n't be too hard on Andy, Hilda. He has had a hard row to hoe all his life life, you know."

"Not a bit harder than lots of other fellows that have got grit enough to act like men in spite of things that are n't to their liking. It always did rile me to have Andy sit round and whine because the stumps in his field caught the plow and jerked him; and he'd say he was n't going to kill himself raising a crop. Then in the fall he'd whine because his corn was all nubbins, when everybody knew he had only made out to scratch between the rows a little, and then left the corn and weeds to tussle for right of way the rest of the season. Why did n't he get down to work and grub the stumps out like other men do? I take it that whining ought to be left to babies and sick women. I like a man that lifts his feet and makes the dust fly when he sets them down. It riles me just to see Andy drag his feet along one after the other as if they were dead loads."

"Why, I don't know as I ever heard you talk so aggravated like, Hilda. I reckon Jerry won't

kick up much dust from this on. But let's get back to your schooling."

"No, Jerry won't kick up much dust, mother; but when you hear him whine over his bad luck, just let me know it. As for my schooling—are you wanting to get rid of me?"

"Now you know better than that, Hilda. I do n't know how to live without you hardly."

"Why could n't you go and stay with me?"

"Land o' mercy, I could n't leave the old place. I came here a bride, and I could n't eat or sleep in peace anywhere else. No, no, Hilda; I do n't want to leave here till I'm taken to Crown Hill for good and all. Do n't ask it of me."

"Do n't fret; I only asked to see what you'd say. I know how you feel. Almost the last thing father said before he died, was for me to take good care of you and never let anything part us while you lived. I told him I'd stick to you till Gabriel blew his trumpet for one or the other of us. Well, you know I'm not one to break my word, mother."

"Yes, I know—that's the Lane in you. But my mind would be easier if you'd give yourself a chance to spruce up and be somebody, now that the way is clear. What is the use to be full-handed if a body do n't get the good of it? John Gibbs is doing well with the land and stock now, and I could get Maggie Baker to stay with me."

"I have n't any call to be a fine lady, mother. I told you what Jerry said that night,—well, after he went away I sat out on the steps and thought of

things, and I gave myself to Jerry, heart and soul, right then and there. I've got as much schooling as he has, and I don't want to get beyond him. I don't know what came between him and me after that night, but I do know he meant what he said. I feel it now the same as then. I was mighty happy—as happy as any girl could be, I reckon, and when I made up my mind to be Jerry's wife I gave up other things I had hoped for. I used to want to learn enough to be a schoolteacher, or a writer of books, or a great traveler; but that's past. I'll tell you my secret, mother: I'm going to stay right here and be true to Jerry Payson till Gabriel blows his trumpet for me. But I'll never let on how I feel."

"I'd just as well give up then, Hilda, but it's mighty disappointing," said Mrs. Lane, wiping her eyes on the hem of her calico apron. "I wish you were n't so set. I can't bear to have you miserable all your days on account of Jerry. You're good-looking and smart and full-handed. I wish you could spunk up and not mope and fret for a half-dead fellow when the country's full of better chances."

"I don't mean to mope and fret. I can't be Jerry's wife, but I can do my best to live happy and make it pleasant for those about me. Things might have been worse—Jerry might have been killed. I mean worse for me—it would be easier for him to be dead. He'll have to be braver, and face worse things than the cannons and bullets he faced in the army. But no one will ever know how it hurts him

to be tied down to a chair the rest of his days. I take it God's at the head of things and knows what's best; and I take it, too, that a woman's love is n't worth much if it do n't stand by a man that got crippled doing his duty to his country. I have n't got what Jerry has to bear up under; but I'll take what's fallen to my share and never blink. I mean to keep on doing my duty by you, mother; but that won't keep me busy, and I've made up my mind to try the adoption business if you're willing. We're full-handed, and I believe that people that have more than they need of the comforts of life ought to divide with them that are needy and helpless. I mean to get my pleasure out of my share of what we've got just that way."

"Land o' mercy, Hilda, where will you get anybody to adopt?"

"Well, that's what I came home so early to talk to you about. Mr. Payson was telling at the dinner table about the Widow Ritchie down in the log house this side of the Hunt timber, you know. She is bed-fast with consumption, and her ten-year-old boy, Sammy, has to make the living for her and a nine-year-old girl. Sammy won't be able to get work enough to keep them from starving when the apple-picking and corn-shucking season is over, and the neighbors are trying to have the family sent to the poorhouse before cold weather sets in. But Mrs. Ritchie won't give up to it. She says she is willing to go herself, if need be, but she do n't want her children there. She wants to find homes for them

among the farmers here. Well, I did n't let on to the Paysons, but I loped the sorrel horse down there before I came home, and took a look at the family. I thought we might take one of the children."

"What sort of youngsters are they?"

"Well, the little girl has a mop and tangle of dun-colored hair and is wild acting, but her eyes are sore and she's half starved, so it is n't a fair time to judge how she would look if she had a chance. You have seen Sammy. He came to the kitchen door and asked the way to Hilton's last week. He was going there to shuck corn. Don't you remember?—he kept looking at the cookies I had just baked, and you took and gave him a handful."

"Land o' mercy, Hilda, not that bench-legged little fellow, with hair like rope yarns and face as speckled as a guinea egg?"

"Yes, that's Sammy. He can't help his looks, poor little man. He has got enough bearing down on him to make his legs bow worse than they do. He works hard, and is doing the best he can for his folks; that goes a long ways with me. That's the sort I like to help—they're worth helping because they're the salt of the earth, I take it."

"Yes, I know; but—I reckon the girl would be more company for us, and maybe she is n't so bow-legged. It's a job to take a child and raise it up right, and a body can love a pretty looking one easier. But which one did you set your mind on, Hilda?"

"I could n't pick *one*, mother. Mrs. Ritchie is

just skin and bones. It's a sin to part that dying woman from her children, and besides, you know what the board and bed are likely to be at the poor-house. Suppose it was you or me, mother, in such a fix. I think women ought to have feelings for each other. We're full-handed, and Mrs. Ritchie is n't long for this world. I'd get pleasure out of adopting the lot of them, if you're willing."

"Land o' mercy, Hilda, that appears like a mighty big adoption for a girl of twenty to set her hand to. I'm plain to say it is n't the sort I'd pick for you, either. But it does seem hard to part the poor woman from her children when she has n't long to live anyhow. I'd hate to shut my door against her, now you've set your heart on having her come. We've got plenty of everything—room and all. I'm willing, Hilda; so we'd best go upstairs and pick a room and get it ready to-night, so you can go and fetch them over early in the morning."

"I'm much obliged, mother. I was afraid you would n't give up to it, but I knew you had a mighty good heart. You'll have to look past the outside of the Ritchies, and count the good that's out of sight."

"Yes, I know. I'll try, but—if Sammy was n't so powerfully bench-legged and freckled—"

"But think of his brave, loving heart, mother. He is doing his very best to get along over a hard road. I'd like him if he looked a lot worse than he does."

"Well, you always did beat all to look at the in-

side of things, Hilda ; but it does seem like the Lord made a sort of scapegoat of Sammy the way He put the poor little fellow together."

Thanks to the timely care and kindness of the Lanes, Mrs. Ritchie lived several months in comfort, and died in peace of mind. Sammy and his sister Susy thrived in their new home, and improved in external appearances. They were neither brilliant nor aspiring, but made good use of their opportunities and grew up into wholesome, contented, and creditable members of the community.

During the latter part of the decade following Hilda Lane's first adoption several changes took place in the old family homestead. Mrs. Lane was laid to rest on Crown Hill ; Samuel Ritchie, having reached manhood, took unto himself a wife, and assumed the entire management of the farm. Susy married a thrifty young farmer and removed to a cozy home of her own. Miss Lane built a cottage on the northwest corner of her land, opposite the Payson residence, and established herself therein. In the meantime she had made another adoption ; and so, with her time and attention occupied in promoting the welfare and happiness of others, she entered upon her fortieth year, healthy, active, cheerful, and greatly respected by all that knew her.

II.

AT PAYSON BEND.

THE sedate old town of Payson Bend is located on the ancient State road leading from St. Louis to points east and north. It is situated in the midst of a section of Illinois once noted for its timber-sheltered streams, rich rolling grain-fields, upland prairies, and the general thrift and worth of its inhabitants, most of whom were either the original owners of lands purchased directly from the Government, or the descendants of such proprietors.

On the hillside at the western limit of Payson Bend, Crown Hill Cemetery borders the left side of the road, and a broom factory thrives on the slope at the right. With these evidences of life and death, industry and peace, as an approach, the once famous highway, after crossing the wooden bridge, climbs the long hill and proceeds through a parade of residences, rival Churches, school buildings, business establishments of all kinds, more residences, and finally cuts through the narrow street that marks the town limits and follows the section line between the Payson and Lane farms eastward.

The Payson corner-stone, a huge, out-cropping rock firmly imbedded in the earth and securely embraced by the gnarled surface roots of a mighty oak, was a noted landmark long before Payson Bend be-

came a town site. The rock had been made use of by an early surveyor, although its southwest extremity scarcely reached the angle of the section it was supposed to indicate. David Payson, the first owner of the quarter section marked by it, was pleased that its bulk lay well within his claim, not only because—in conjunction with the giant oak—it gave a certain distinction to his property, but because of a remarkable, never-failing spring of water which bubbled up through a cleft in the rock, and, falling into a natural stone basin, furnished cool refreshment for men and beasts as they journeyed along the way. The roadbed swerved sharply around the obstacle at that point in the highway, but no one was ever known to suggest the removal of the old landmark. On the contrary, it was a source of pride in the locality, and from the sharp bend in the road around it the place took and retained the name of Payson Bend.

A hundred feet, perhaps, from this peculiar corner-stone David Payson built a tavern in the days of stage coaches, peddler wagons, ox-carts, gigs, and horseback travelers. The State road was then the popular avenue for traffic of all description, and the tavern and hostry were held in high favor by its patrons, and were included in the general name of the locality as Payson's Bend. Therefore it is not strange that when a town site was laid out on the adjoining land in after years, that it was also promptly designated as the town of Payson Bend, in spite of the desires of its founders to give it another name.

With the advent of railroads in adjacent districts the stress of travel along the stage-coach line gradually decreased, and the Payson hostry, falling into decay, was torn down, and a smaller stable built in its place; but the substantial stone tavern house was remodeled and kept in good repair as a farm residence by the two generations of Paysons that had occupied it prior to this point of our story. And at this time Payson Bend, though seven miles from a railroad, received its mail daily, and continued to prosper in spite of ambitious rival towns more advantageously situated, so far as railroad facilities were concerned.

The Payson farm had now descended to Jerry Payson and his widowed sister, Peggy Strong; and the Lane farm to Hilda, the last of the Lanes. The residences of the two families faced each other on Stage Street—or rather on the highway which was a continuation of Stage Street—and the cross street that separated the two farms from the town divided Miss Lane's cottage from Judge Horine's handsome mansion, and the Payson's from the cozy home of Miss Betty Bigelow. The representatives of four well-established families were thus located on the four corners around the famous Payson landmark.

Twenty years had passed since Jerry Payson's return from the Civil War a physical wreck, but his happy spirit had not forsaken him; and although confined to a roller chair in which he was wheeled about, his sunny disposition made him a favorite at home and abroad.

Andy Peters, having come back from the South soon after Jerry's return, had sought and obtained

a position as caretaker of the crippled soldier, since it had seemed expedient to employ him notwithstanding his recent wearing of the Gray. He had proven a faithful attendant, and the two men were warmly attached to each other in spite of vastly different characters and opinions.

Being almost helpless, and for the most part confined to his chair during his waking hours, Jerry Payson was compelled to expend his abundant spirits in such ways as he could. Having the hampering evidence of his injuries always with him, it is not strange that the cause of them was never long absent from his mind. But passing years had not embittered him nor lessened his commendation of the course that resulted in such stupendous sacrifice of life and limb, and dotted our fair land with graves. His patriotism and loyalty to the Union, and his enthusiastic homage to the Stars and Stripes, seemed never to grow less fervent, for to him the stern necessities of the sixties—the deadly conflicts and dearly bought victories—were thrilling and glorious memories, beside which his personal misfortunes counted for little.

He continued to wear the Blue at all times and seasons, and to the right side of his chair, as if to justify and glorify his physical losses, always was fastened a strong staff bearing the flag of his well-beloved country. To see Jerry Payson was to behold the Stars and Stripes also, for whether at home or abroad the emblem of Freedom accompanied him with his roller chair.

III.

A REJECTED GUEST.

It was a cold November night. The high, full moon poured its white splendor down upon the slumbering town, and mantled it with a silvery sheen of purity and peacefulness. The church clock struck two vibrant strokes. A weary negress began the ascent of the long hill, on the west edge of Payson Bend, with slow and faltering footsteps, keeping well to the middle of the road and drawing a high-wheeled hand-cart, in which was huddled an emaciated white woman. Suddenly the toiler paused, peering toward the left side of the road with frightened eyes.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, Mis' Radcliffe, is dat a grabeya'd jam agin de town, or jes' de hant ob grabestones? I'se mos' scairt to def! Yo' shuah dis am de right town, honey?"

"Yes. Do n't be alarmed, Rhody; that is Crown Hill Cemetery. We are nearly home now. Uncle Jerry and mamma live at the other end of this street. Keep straight ahead—but wait, let me walk up the rest of the hill; you are n't strong enough for this hard pull."

"Yo' bunch yo'se'f up dar an' keep wa'm, honey. I'se jes' es strong es dat fat mule ob niggah Bill's;

yo' min' dat sassy mule? Yo' s'pect I'se gwinter hab yo' git up dis hill on yo' feet? Nebah!"

The resolute creature plodded slowly onwards, her features contorted with pain and weariness. Up the steep hill, through the quiet town, past the big corner-stone where the shadow of the giant oak fell heavily upon her, and where crisp brown leaves crackled softly beneath her lagging feet the pilgrim journeyed, pausing at last at the gate of the old Payson place.

"Yo' shuah dis am de place, Mis' Radcliffe?" asked the negress, peering through the flickering shadows of the great ash trees that lined the path and partly screened the house. "Dat 's pow'ful fine up dar?"

"Yes, it 's my old home. It 's the moonlight that makes it look so fine. We've got here at last, Rhody, and O, I 'm so glad!"

The woman began to sob piteously. The relief of knowing that her tiresome journey was ended, was quickly followed by the dread of having soon to recite her woes to her mother. She was keenly alive to the sorrows that had driven her back to the home of her childhood a pitiable wreck. She had married a handsome young Southerner against her mother's wishes in her teens and gone South with him, little dreaming of the fate that was soon to blight her happiness.

"Do n' grieb so, honey. I'se gwinter wheel yo' up to de big front do' an' leab yo' dar. Den I'se gwine roun' to de back do' an' wake yo' ma, an' tell

huh 'bout t'ings. Den I'se gwine tote yo' in de house de nex' t'ing, I s'pect."

"O, I wish you 'd tell them not to ask me any questions till I get rested, Rhody. Tell them I'm so tired,—tired and broken-hearted!" wailed the woman, weakly.

"Dar, dar, do n' yo' grieb no mo', Mis' Radcliffe. I'se gwinter fix dat all wid yo' folks. Dar, do n' grieb no mo', kase yo' gwinter see yo' ma an' yo' Unc' Jerry, an' I s'pect dey gwinter gib us some hot tea an' bread an' meat."

After these attempts to comfort her charge, Rhody followed the path around the house and knocked loudly on the back door. A man came in response, bearing a lamp in his hands. He started when he saw the negress, and, stepping out on the latticed porch, closed the door behind him, and asked gruffly:

"Well, what do you want?"

"I'se Rhody Despa'd, massa. I s'pect yo' is Mis' Radcliffe's Unc' Jerry, ain' yo'?" replied the woman, in soft, drawling tones.

"No matter who I be. What do you want?"

"I'se done fotch Mis' Radcliffe up f'om de Souf. I'se done tote huh ober f'om de li'l town dat de ca's fotch us to in a ca't. Massa Jason's daid, an' po' Mis' Radcliffe done hab berry ha'd times. I'se done tol' Massa Jason, jes' fo' he fotch de las' bref, dat I'se shuah gwinter tote Mis' Radcliffe up Norf to huh folks. We done made out to git money toged-

dah to come up de ribbah on de steamboat to Sain' Louey. Den we come on de ca's to de li'l' town obah dar, seben miles f'om heah. De folks obah dar say dey can't trus' Mis' Radcliffe fo' de hiah ob a cab, kase we ain' got no mo' money. Den I jes' make off wid a ca't I foun' back ob de big stoah-house, kase I'se boun' to git Mis' Radcliffe obah to huh folks. S'pect yo 'll send dat ca't back to de li'l' town kase I ain' no low down niggah dat steals, an' I did n't ax fo' de loan ob it."

"Where *is* Lina, if your pack of yarns is true?"

"At de big do', laik white ladies am boun' to come to dey folks. I jes' come to dis do', kase I mus' tell yo' all dat de po' chile am sick an' mos' in de grabe wid trouble, an' she mus' hab res' befo' yo' all ax huh 'bout t'ings. Please call huh ma, massa, an' les' git de po' chile in de house."

"Mebby you 're telling what 's so, and mebbly you are n't. I 'll go through the house and see if Lina is out there in front; but you clear out. Payson Bend do n't harbor niggers."

"Yes, massa, but I ain' no low down niggah. I'se come Norf to tote Mis' Radcliffe home. I'se done wo' out an' mos' sta'ved. Let me tote Mis' Radcliffe in de house, an' res' till de mo'ning."

"I tell you to clear out. Nary a roof in town dares to cover a nigger. It 's against the laws of the town. If the authorities get sight of your black face there 'll be a fire at your heels quicker 'n blazes! You 'd best move on in a hurry."

"In de mon'ing, massa. I 'm fa' f'om home, an'

sick. I ain' got no mo' money, an' I 'se done wo' out. Let me res' till de mon'ing."

"But you can't come into this house, I tell you!" replied the man, angrily.

"I'll go to de ba'n, massa. De hay is good 'nough fo' me."

"Nor the barn! I won't have the hay spoilt for the critters. There 's a family of niggers living on the creek four miles east of here. Take the road and you can't miss them. They live in a log shanty in a little clearing in the edge of the timber not more than a hundred yards from the big road. Now git along. I'll look after Lina if she 's there."

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, massa!" began the desperate creature, piteously; but Andy Peters turned into the house and locked the door. When he emerged from the front entrance to verify the woman's story she was already there, bending over a limp heap in the high-wheeled cart.

When the man held the lamp close to the pallid face of the unconscious occupant of the cart, he found it difficult at first to recognize in it the once bright and winsome daughter of Peggy Strong. But his eyes were still pitiless when the negress raised her wretched face and pleaded:

"Let me tote huh in de house befo' I go, massa. Let me tell huh ma what 's boun' to come to de po' chile in jes' a li'l' while."

"There 's the path to the gate. I won't stir a finger for Lina till you get your black carcass out of sight!"

With a moan the negress laid her trembling hands caressingly on the quiet form of the woman she had served so well; but only for a moment's lingering; then she went down the path laced with the flickering shadows of the ash trees, and out at the gate of the old Payson place forever. Attracted by the sound of rippling water, she sought the spring at the corner-stone and drank from the metal cup chained to the wayside fountain. It was coated thinly with ice and burnt her lips; but she drank thirstily again and again. Then, sighing deeply, she looked about her.

Westward she noted the bare trees that lined the long street of the sleeping town, through which she had so lately trudged. Eastward the moonlit highway stretched into the distance like a narrowing, gray-white ribbon between silver-mantled hedges. Northward she saw the gleam of lights beginning to flash from the windows of the Payson house. Southward Hilda Lane's cottage nestled in a cluster of fruit-trees, and along the street front a row of poplars stood straight and tall and sheened with light, pleasant sentinels guarding the gate that stood invitingly open.

"Take my han's, Lawd, an' lead me de way dat 's bes' fo' me to go, kase I'se sick an' fa' f'om home!" cried the suffering negress, turning her pain-stricken face to the calm heavens and reaching forth her hands in an agony of desolation. For awhile she stood praying, and then, glancing about, her eyes fell upon the open gate.

With uncertain steps she crossed the bend in the road, staggered through Hilda Lane's gateway and past the cottage. The great, white moon looked down serenely and watched the shadow that flitted along under the apple-trees toward the stable at the rear of the cottage, and gave no sign. But the thick carpet of autumn leaves thrilled at the touch of the weary pilgrim's feet, and rustled in melancholy sympathy and farewell.

When the church clock struck three solemn strokes, Andy Peters hastily approached the Lane cottage and summoned its mistress to the assistance of Peggy Strong in reviving her daughter from a deep swoon.

Hilda Lane was prompt to respond, and efficient in her help; but when the patient was restored to consciousness, and later soothed to sleep after vain requests for Rhody, her natural curiosity demanded satisfaction. Drawing Mrs. Strong into the hall she whispered:

"Where *did* Lina drop from, Peggy? Why, I nearly fell out of the window, I was that bedazzled, when I leaned out to see who was pounding on my front door, and Andy screeched up that Lina was home in a dead faint, and you wanted me as quick as I could trot over."

"La me, Hilda, I do n't know the proper truth myself. But now she's sleeping we might go and ask Andy about it," replied Mrs. Strong, turning back into the chamber for a last anxious survey of the worn face on the pillows.

The two women went downstairs to the sitting-room, where a fire snapped and blazed cheerily in the open fireplace. Andy Peters sat in a dejected attitude at one end of the hearth, and Jerry Payson at the other awaiting news of the sick woman. Mrs. Strong reported at once:

"Lina came to her senses and drank a cup of hot milk, Jerry; but she's gone to sleep now, just too tuckered out to live nearly. Such a job as we had to get her warm in spite of blankets and hot soapstones and the like. I do n't know what I should've done without Hilda. I want Andy to get the doctor at daylight. I'm afraid my poor girl is in a bad way. I do n't see how she made out to get here alive. But how *did* she get here, Andy? Hilda and me want to know. I was that upset when you woke me up right in the middle of dreaming I had the lockjaw, that—"

"O glory, Peggy, your jaws could n't be locked!" interrupted Jerry Payson, grimly.

"I did n't more than half sense what you was saying except that Lina had come home. Did you say a stranger brought her over from Talbot Station?"

"I reckon I did," mumbled Andy.

"Was it a woman? Lina's been asking for some one by the name of Rhody. She says she'd be dead if Rhody had n't taken care of her. I did n't dare tell her there was n't any such a body here. I told her to go to sleep and rest herself, and let Rhody

rest till morning, too. Now, who is Rhody, and what 's become of her, Andy?"

With a dogged look on his face Andy picked up the brass-knobbed tongs, deliberately lifted a burning fagot from the rim of the fire, and casting it on the backlog spat on the red coals, hung up the tongs, crossed his legs, and settled down in his chair in a defensive attitude.

"I reckon I'm in for a pitch battle—three to one," he began, with a swift glance at the attentive man across the hearth from him. "'T aint likely ary one of you 'll give up nagging at me till you 've run out of shot, and the Lord knows when that 'll come to pass. I 'd as well give you the field and be done with it. It was a nigger, drat her, that brought Lina from Talbot Station in a hand cart she 'd stole from the station. You can pack it down in your head that a nigger 'll steal something at every halt, if it 's nothing but a tick off a dog's back. She told a lot of stuff about Jason Radcliffe's dying, and her promising him to bring Lina up here. Said they came up river on a steamer, and out to Talbot on the cars. Got off there without any money and no way to get over here but to foot it, so she stole a cart—*stole* it, mind you—and hauled Lina over."

"But where is she?" asked Mrs. Strong, impatiently.

"Lordy, Peggy, how do I know? I took Lina off her hands, and told her to cut dirt for that nigger shanty on the creek. Now, you 've got all I know

about the concern. Don't be backward—blaze away! You'll find my black clothes in my chest, and there's room for me on Crown Hill when you've got your satisfaction. The world's been against me from the time I fetched my first breath. I don't know as I care how soon I get out of it."

"And so," began Mrs. Strong immediately, "you took it upon yourself to turn that poor thing away from our door without giving Jerry or me a chance to say a word of thanks for all she'd done for Lina. Like as not she was cold and hungry and about to drop after that seven-mile jaunt from Talbot. I wish you had n't done a thing like that, Andy; it's unfeeling."

"*Unfeeling*, sakes alive!" put in Miss Lane, indignantly. "That's a mighty sugary name for such meanness. I'd call it wicked, and worse than wicked, to turn a lone woman—a Christian at that—away from fire and shelter in the dead of night!"

"She was n't a Christian!" growled Andy. "She was nothing but a pesky nigger, I tell you!"

"You must be a heathen, Andy," declared Miss Lane, scornfully. "Was n't it a Christian thing for her to do for Lina the way she did? Well sir, I take it a body's a Christian when they're working leg and arm and backbone to follow the best light they've got, and do the duty that's close to them. Rhody did n't shy off from her duty because of a hard job, no matter what color she is, and she deserved better treatment than she got from you. I take it the recording angel is n't a fair book-keeper

if he has n't put a black mark against the name of Andy Peters, *white* man, and a white mark against the name of Rhody, *black* woman, for what's been going on to-night."

"Lordy, if the recording angel has n't any better judgment than to mix up a lot of pesky niggers in his count of things, I do n't care what sort of jim-cracks he puts against my name."

"Sakes alive, Andy Peters! It is n't a mite of use for you to sit there like a billygoat butting at a rock pile. You know well enough you do n't like brimstone. Your mother had to hold your nose and hands to get you to swallow sulphur and molasses when you was little; but there won't be any sweetening in the dose you're fixing to get by 'n by. What time did that woman leave here?" Miss Lane threw her shawl over her shoulders as she asked the question, and stood waiting with a determined air.

"If you mean that black woman—the church clock struck three when I called you to come over. She had n't been gone fifteen minutes, I reckon," responded the man, sullenly.

"Well, I'm going home to hitch up Hero and go on the hunt of her. I'll take her to my house and treat her according to the way she treated Lina."

"Wait, Hilda!" commanded Jerry Payson, sternly, as the woman turned to go. "Andy, you go and hitch old Gray to the buggy for Hilda. It'll be handier for her to start from here. Drive up to the block in front."

Andy rose from his chair and stood for a moment

staring into the fire. His reflections were not pleasant evidently, for he suddenly snatched his clay pipe from the mantle, dashed it to pieces on the stone hearth, and strode from the room with a muttered oath. Miss Lane smiled grimly, but Mrs. Strong, whose disposition was extremely placid usually, was somewhat dismayed.

"I do wish Andy was n't so fitified when he gets mad," she fretted. "Do you suppose he has any notion of hitching up old Gray, Jerry?"

"Do n't you go to borrowing trouble, Peggy. He'll have Gray hooked up in a flash. Andy's mightily set against the darkies, but he is n't mean-hearted about other things to speak of."

"Seems like you might have spoken up and let Andy know how you felt about the way he's acted, Jerry. You sat there as though you were n't touched a bit, and I know you do n't uphold his doings," said Mrs. Strong, aggrievedly.

"Glóry, Peggy, I *had* to sit here. I'm tolerable *set* in my chair, you know. Andy had as much as he could well live under, I guess, and what I've got to say 'll keep till another time."

"Well, one word of yours goes further with him than the heft of all Hilda or me could say in a week; and I hope you'll make your feelings plain when you do open your mouth."

"He knows my feelings well enough, Peggy, and words do n't always hit the spot we're driving at. You women folks have said a plenty for one time; he might forget where he's hit if you keep on before

his hurts get good and sore. But say, Hilda, if you find that nigger woman you fetch her back here. I'm boss of this house yet awhile. She'll be my company as long as she wants to stay under my roof. Do you hear, Hilda?"

"I'm not deaf, Jerry. Of course I'll bring her here if you say so, because of the justice of it. But she'd be welcome at my house—you know that."

"Glory, yes. You'd make a stray yellow dog welcome, Hilda."

"I'd let him get warm and give him a good square meal, anyhow. But I must be getting out to the block so Andy won't have to tie up."

"I can't bear to have you go off on a jaunt like that this time of night," said Mrs. Strong, anxiously.

"O, it's light as day outside, and I'm not a bit afraid, Peggy. Don't you worry about me."

"Maybe you'd best take Andy with you," suggested Jerry, slyly. "But, say Hilda, don't you and him forget what you're going after, and drive up to the preacher's instead."

"You shut up, Jerry!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Say, Hilda, hold on a bit! You'll have to fix up how you'll sit in the buggy after you get Rhody in. The seat's only big enough for two, and Andy won't sit on her lap nor let her sit on his. I guess you'll—"

"*Will* you shut up, Jerry," interrupted Miss Lane, hurrying from the room.

"Ha, ha, ha! He, he, he!" laughed the man merrily.

Andy was leading the horse to the block as Hilda came out of the house. "Shan't I go with you?" he asked humbly enough as she climbed into the buggy. "You'll be afraid on the big road this time of the night, won't you?"

"Afraid? Sakes alive, it is n't likely I'll run across anything worse than you, Andy!" replied the woman tartly, as she slapped the Gray with the lines and drove away.

Miss Lane's keen eyes searched both sides of the road as she drove briskly along; but although she went clear to the log hut in the edge of the timber and inquired there for Rhody, she found no trace of her. It was sunrise when she returned to Jerry Payson's and reported her failure. Mrs. Strong insisted on her stopping awhile to get warm and share the appetizing breakfast Ellen, the maid of all work, was hastening on her account; but she refused:

"No, no, Peggy. I can't stop. Like as not Robbie will be awake and get frightened when he finds I'm gone. I've got batter set for buckwheat cakes, and sausage balls made out to fry. The water'll boil for coffee while I'm milking and feeding. I never can eat in peace till the critters are fed. So Lina's sleeping yet, is she? Well, I'm glad of that. But I do hate it about not finding Rhody. I guess I'll drive over to Talbot Station after breakfast, and see if she's gone back there. I'd like to say a kind word to her and give her money enough to take her back home if she wants to go."

"I want the money part to be my share, Hilda. You've got the trouble of hunting her up for your part; but don't put yourself out too much. We can't help the way Andy acted, you know. I reckon the woman will get along well enough, anyhow. Niggers can stand more than white folks can, and never get sick that I ever heard of."

"Sakes alive, Peggy. It's mighty little you've ever seen of them, but you do n't suppose they live on and never get sick enough to die, do you?"

"No, I reckon not," replied Mrs. Strong, stupidly. "But there's no use for you to make yourself sick trying to find one that's sly enough to get out of sight in such a hurry."

"O, I'm not one to fret overmuch, Peggy. I'll do what I can and then give up peaceably. But I take it a body's good will does n't amount to much if it fizzles out before it's half tried to prove itself. Well, I'll be going now. If you need me on Lina's account, let me know."

IV.

HILDA LANE'S DISCOVERY.

WHEN she reached her cottage Miss Lane uncovered a bed of live coals in the sitting-room fireplace, and carried a shovelful of them to the kitchen stove, adding a generous supply of dry hickory chips. While the quick fire went roaring up the chimney she piled some fagots in the fireplace, and warmed herself thoroughly before the leaping flames.

Presently, finding Robbie—her little adopted boy—still asleep, she pinned her breakfast shawl around her shoulders, tied the strings of a black yarn hood beneath her plump chin, set the bubbling teakettle farther back on the kitchen stove, took a shining milk pail from its hook in the closet, and went out of doors, closely followed by a big gray cat.

"It 's mighty fresh this morning, is n't it, Franklin?" she queried with a shiver, walking briskly along the frosty path leading to the stable where Hero, the fat, sleek buggy horse, and Spotty, the fat, sleek cow, were warmly housed.

Franklin responded after the manner of intelligent cats, arched his back, and after a few kittenish maneuvers among the currant-bushes beside the path, ran up the slant trunk of an apple-tree, and,

crawling out on a limb, suddenly dropped down upon Miss Lane's shoulders as she stood unfastening the stable door.

"Sakes alive, Franklin, you're as tricky as a monkey! Now, what possessed you to do that? Get down! You've jerked my shawl loose and—yes, of course, the pin's gone to Halifax!" grumbled the startled woman, searching the hem of her dress waist for another pin and again fastening her shawl.

There were loud demonstrations of welcome from Hero and Spotty as Miss Lane proceeded to give both their morning's feed, and Franklin frisked about, mewing persuasively for his share of new milk.

"I've spoilt you, Franklin, so I suppose I'll have to keep on milking your bowlful first," remarked the woman finally, seating herself on a milk-stool beside Spotty and suiting her action to her word.

"Me-o-w, me-o-w," replied Franklin, putting one soft paw on the edge of the brimming bowl.

"Sakes alive! Now, what was that?" questioned Miss Lane, pausing in her task and listening to a peculiar sound that seemed to waver down from the hayloft. Again the sound issued forth like the wailing of a young infant. Giving Franklin his milk, Miss Lane set aside the milk pail and rose up, determined to investigate the mystery.

"What on earth! Where did you drop from? Why, that's a newborn baby, isn't it?" were the astonished utterances that escaped Miss Lane's lips

as, having climbed the narrow stairway, she stood staring down at the haggard face of a young negress, who looked up with anguished eyes as she tried to clasp closer to her bosom a tiny wailing infant swathed in a soiled petticoat.

The loft was a clean, roomy place, with a good supply of prime timothy hay packed to the roof on one side, while on the other a drift of fresh, yellow wheat straw reached to the sill of an east window, through which the morning sun was streaming. Just where the glittering shaft lay brightest on the golden drift, Rhody Despard had buried herself in the straw for warmth and shelter.

"Do n' be mad, Missus, kase de misery come on fo' I could make off to de place I 'lowed to go. I'se Jim Despa'd's woman fo' de law an' fo' de preachah. I ain' no low down niggah, 'deed I ain'. I'se got de right to hab dis li'l' one. I'se come in de da'k ob de night to tote po' Mis' Radcliffe home, laik I tol' Massa Jason I 'd shuah do."

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed Miss Lane, with quick understanding as she dropped to her knees beside the sufferer. "So you are the kind woman that brought Lina home last night? Andy Peters drove you away from the door without a bite to eat, or a word of thanks! Jerry Payson nor Lina's mother wouldn't have done that way by you. I reckon Andy tried to frighten you some, too. Told you about the rules of Payson Bend, and all that, just because God put a black skin over your bones instead of a white one. Well, maybe God's got never-

ending patience with such folks as Andy—I suppose He ought to have as long as He made them—but I have n't.

“So you crawled into my hayloft, did you? Well, that was right as long as you did n't know that a woman with a heart lived in the cottage. And you've laid here suffering at *such a time* with no one near to hold your hands and help you along with a word of cheer? Sakes alive! Well, you can rest easy now, and tell me where your worst misery is. I'm going to take care of you from this on.”

The negress gave a brief account of her condition, talking with increasing difficulty, and swooning at last from sheer exhaustion. Miss Lane fell to rubbing her cold arms and hands vigorously. The infant cried again, and Franklin, having finished his breakfast and followed his mistress, began to me-o-w in his most melancholy tones.

“Do shut your mouth, Franklin! Can't you see that I'm in a worse mess than a hen with a hatching of goslings on her hands?” demanded the distressed Samaritan, trying to soothe the babe by shaking it gently with one hand, while she chafed the mother's limp body with the other.

Presently the dusky lids quivered and fluttered upward from the dull black eyes, at which favorable sign Miss Lane snatched up the cat and was hastening to the house for needful remedies when she saw Dr. Hilton driving along the street and hailed him:

“Come in, Doctor; I've got a patient that needs you mighty bad!”

Dr. Hilton tied his horse, and made his way to the kitchen door, where he had seen Hilda disappear. He found her pouring some boiling water over a measure of tea. She filled a jug with hot water also before glancing up and saying:

"Here, Doctor, if you'll carry this jug and teapot, I guess I can make out to take the blankets and the rest of these things. Come on, now, if you're ready."

"Perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me where you expect me to go?" said the physician, picking up the jug mechanically, but pausing with his fingers on the handle of the teapot, bewildered by Miss Lane's preparations to depart.

"To the barn."

"The barn? I draw the line at beasts in my practice. You know that well enough. What do you mean by calling me in to see your horse or cow? There's Green, the veterinary—"

"Green fiddlesticks! It is n't a beast that needs doctoring."

"But I refuse to visit a patient in anybody's barn!"

"O, well if you're too high and mighty to go to my barn to help a poor human that's in a bad fix, why go on your way in peace, if you can, but I wish you'd have the kindness to stop at that new doctor's office as you go past and send him here. He looks pleasant, and I'd as soon give my money to him as any one if he's got the shell of a heart in him."

Miss Lane was half way to the stable by this

time, and Dr. Hilton reluctantly followed, perplexed and angry. Nothing more was said till the pair halted beside the negress in the loft. Then, with disgust overspreading his countenance, the physician turned to his patron and said:

"I understood you to say it was a human being you wished me to visit. I call *this* a critter."

Miss Lane slipped the jug of hot water down at the feet of the sick woman, and deftly removing the straw from about her quivering body wrapped the warm blankets around her. Then pouring some tea into a cup she said gently:

"Here, Rhody, drink a little tea to warm you up, and then we'll try to make you more comfortable." But the wretched creature, already chilled with death, shook her head weakly and whispered haltingly:

"De Lawd bress yo', Missus! But dis po' li'l baby—"

"Do n't you fret, Rhody. I'll stand by you and your baby as long as either of you need a friend, if it's till Gabriel blows his trumpet for me. You leave things to me now, and drink this tea to strengthen you."

Again the thick lips murmured plaintively: "De Lawd bress yo', Missus! I'se gwinter gib dis po' li'l brack lam' to yo' to keep fo' de Lawd's sake. Tell Mis' Radcliffe—I'se gwine up dar—wha' de brack folks gits white—an' de golden chu'ch bells—keep ringing—all de time. Tell Mis' Radcliffe I'se ain' scairt—kase I s'pect Jim—an' Massa Jason 'll—

be waiting at de big golden gate—wid de singing book—an' de white robe—dat 's gwinter be fo' me."

"Yes, yes, I 'll tell her, Rhody," said Miss Lane, swallowing painfully, and blinking back threatening tears. Then she rose and demanded quietly of the Doctor, who stood apparently unmoved, but with his professional instincts fully alert:

"Are you going to stand there like a stone hitching post and let this woman die without lifting a finger to save her?"

Without replying the man bent over and laid his fingers on the wrist of the negress. She was breathing gaspingly, and exhibited other unfavorable symptoms.

"You 'll have to get some one to stay here with you, Miss Lane," said the physician, when at last he turned from his review of the patient. "You 'll need help; but I don't know of any one who would be apt to come unless it is Mrs. Denny. Of course Mrs. Strong is out of the question. I have just come from there—her hands are full."

"Yes, I know Peggy can't come. But you can help me get this poor woman into the house, can't you?"

"It would only hasten the end," replied the man in a whisper, "and, besides, there is no need for you to contaminate your house with this affair; it's bad enough to have her here. You know the sentiment of Payson Bend."

"Sakes alive, do let me forget the sins of Payson

Bend for a minute if I can, Doctor. Will you stay here while I get Elviry Denny?"

"No, I prefer to get Mrs. Denny. But I'll leave some powders for your charge."

After the powders were prepared, Dr. Hilton motioned to Miss Lane and led the way downstairs, where he said:

"It's of no use to hope; the creature is too far gone. I doubt if she lives an hour longer. I only left the powders to satisfy you that an effort was made to help her."

"Well, I'm mighty thankful to you, Doctor, till you're better paid. I'll go back up there now and do what I can, but please tell Elviry Denny to hurry, and maybe we can save the baby."

"You'll do the world a favor to let it die. There's too many niggers now."

Miss Lane tossed her head impatiently, and hurried up the narrow stairs again, but the negress had fallen into a state of coma, from which she did not again rally. Soon after Mrs. Denny arrived a tremor of the dusky body, followed by a feeble gasp, marked the last struggle of the weary pilgrim.

But Rhody Despard was no longer an outcast far from home. She had crossed the line of shadows and mysteries, and reached the fair land of her dreams, "where brack folks git white, an' de golden chu'ch bells keep ringing all de time."

V.

A NEW ADOPTION.

A COUPLE of weeks after Rhody Despard was laid to rest in one corner of the Lane burial lot on Crown Hill—albeit against the protest of the town people—Miss Lane sat sewing beside the window of her cozy sitting-room, when she saw Andy Peters wheeling Jerry Payson up to the cottage in his roller chair. She rose at once and opened the door to bid them welcome.

“Well, well, Jerry, what’s going to happen?” she asked.

“Ha, ha! I told Andy you’d be at your wits’ end when you got sight of us. Ha, ha, ha! he, he! I’ll own up on the spot—I’ve come a purpose to see your pickaninny.”

“I do say. Well, come right in; I’m glad something brought you over. Wheel Jerry up to the fire, Andy, and take that armchair yourself. So you’ve come to see my baby? I’ve been going over names in my mind nearly all afternoon, but I can’t settle on one to fit this little thing. Perhaps you can think of one, Jerry.”

Miss Lane drew forward a large rocking-chair, in which several feather pillows were heaped to

make a soft, warm nest for the infant so strangely thrust into her care. Carefully turning back a small patchwork quilt and a white wool blanket, she exposed a tiny dark morsel of humanity. Jerry Payson bent toward it curiously, exclaiming:

"O glory, Hilda! Peggy said it was a mite of a thing, but—why, I never saw its like for miteness. It looks like a day-old field mouse. Have you got the heft of it yet?"

"Yes, Mrs. Denny and me weighed it in my butter scales this morning. What do you suppose it weighs?"

"Well—I don't know—a pound maybe, or three at a big stretch."

"You're a ways off yet. What do you judge, Andy?"

"I ain't no judge of young monkeys!"

"Who is talking about monkeys? I'm talking about this baby. It weighs four pounds and eight ounces. It's growing too, and will be big a plenty for its age when it gets plumped out. It's mostly bones now."

"So you're counting on its living, and on adopting it, are you, Hilda?" asked Jerry Payson, shaking his head doubtfully over the prospect.

"Yes, I intend to raise it if it lives, and I don't see anything to hinder it if it keeps on getting peart."

"Peart? Ha, ha, ha! he, he! A great show for peartness!"

"Sakes alive, Jerry! Why, a humming-bird

is n't much of a show, but it's dazzling for peartness. And a flea—why, a flea is next to nothing to look at, but it's the gospel law for peartness."

"Ha, ha! It does seem that way. But why do n't you try a little soap on your adoption, Hilda? It's mighty off color for a Payson Bend youngster."

"Do shut up, Jerry. The poor little thing might sort of sense what you're saying and feel hurt. It's got two of the knowingest black eyes I ever saw."

"*Two?* Ha, ha, ha! *Two* eyes? Why, it's a sort of a freak, is n't it, Hilda?"

"Sakes alive, Jerry! You've got one of your worst spells to-day, have n't you? Suppose you settle down now, and mention over a few good names for women."

"For women? It looks like cruelty to make that mite of a baby carry the heft of a woman's name. It's too big a load. Better wait and see if it lives and grows any."

"A name won't hinder it from growing. It's heathenish to let it go without a name."

"Well I reckon you're the boss of it. Are you going to let it take Lane for its surname?"

"No, its surname will be the one that belongs to it. Its father's name was Despard."

"Yes,—well, that's settled. Now I'll tell you my way of thinking, Hilda. That's a child of Freedom, is n't it?"

"Yes, to be sure; but I do n't want to call her Freedom."

"No; but how does Liberty strike you? If I

was naming a nigger baby—a girl—in this day and season I'd call her Liberty. Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!"

"But drat the niggers!" growled Andy Peters.

"I do n't know as I could do better than name her Liberty," said Miss Lane, reflectively. "I had n't thought of that."

"It's the best you'll find," declared Jerry Payson, decidedly. "But I'll come to the point of my business now, Hilda. I guess I've aggravated you enough for one time. Judge Horine came to see me this morning, and asked me to remonstrate with you about the way you are flying in the face of public opinion and breaking the rules of Payson Bend. I told him I did 'nt feel called to advise you, because I thought you had judgment of your own. I reckon you know your bearings, and can see your way clear to stand by your colors, Hilda?"

"Now what made the judge bother you? Why did n't he come to me if he wants to know which way the wind is blowing in this quarter?"

"Well, he said he hoped a little friendly counsel would bring you to a sense of law and order without a visit from any of the town authorities. He's one, you know. I told him I'd come and make a friendly visit and let you know the feeling of the public, but I would n't agree to advise you one way or the other."

"I'm glad you've got feeling and sense, Jerry. I'm just as law abiding as anybody, but I take it there's times when a body has to use common sense

and judgment, and pick up grit to stand by particular points of justice. I try to get fair ideas by going round and round a point till I get the up and downs of the outside and the run of its inside works; then, if it takes my notion of what's right, I join it on to my other ideas, and it's there to stay. I do n't want to talk too much to you, Jerry, because I do n't want to get you or anybody mixed up in this mess, if the Payson Bend folks are bound to stir up a mess out of my doings. But, if you feel called to take back any word to Judge Horine, you can tell him that I've laid out to raise this baby if it lives, and if I live to raise it. And when he sees a white flag flapping over Hilda Lane's cottage, because of her being afraid to stand by the right in the face of Payson Bend authorities, he can be sure she's lost her mind and is n't responsible for her actions."

"Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!" shouted Jerry Payson, catching at the folds of his chair flag exultantly.

"But drat the niggers!" muttered Andy, wrathfully.

"Sakes alive, Andy, it seems like a man near fifty ought to begin to see the right of things," commented Miss Lane.

"I ain't but forty-five, the same as Jerry!"

"Well, you're past the veal age, I reckon, and ought to know jimson from clover by this time."

"Lordy, Hilda, you've got the peskiest tongue that ever wagged, I reckon."

"Sakes alive, you just go over to the looking-glass and take a squint at your own wagging tongue, Andy," retorted the woman.

"Ha, ha, ha! he, he!" laughed Jerry Payson. "I'd say, Andy, you and me had best retreat now, or you and Hilda'll get to sharp-shooting directly. It's near six, anyhow."

Andy got up rather sullenly, and began to wheel the rolling-chair towards the door, which Miss Lane opened.

"Why, I had no idea it was so late, Jerry; but before you go tell me how Lina is getting on."

A quick change came over Jerry Payson's face; the merriment vanished instantly. "I do n't think there's much change, Hilda. She eats mighty little, and sits humped up by the fire in Peggy's room for the most part, moaning and shivering as if some sort of chill had struck clean to the marrow of her bones. I'm uneasy about her; but Peggy thinks she'll get better after while."

"O yes, I reckon she will; but it will take a while for her mind to get settled after all she's gone through. But, there, my baby is waking up. Just leave the gate open, Andy, Robbie will shut it after while."

"Say, Hilda!" called back Jerry Payson, "that baby's name is Liberty, mind."

"Well, maybe so. I'll think about it," replied the woman, closing the door and hastening to her young charge.

VI.

A VAIN PROTEST.

A FEW days after Christmas Miss Lane was visited by a committee of three of Payson Bend's most influential personages. They were Judge Horine, Professor Bentley, and Mr. Hodge, a prominent citizen and Churchman, who introduced the object of the visit:

"We have come on a little friendly business, Miss Lane, trusting that, as a sensible, Christian woman, you will not take offense at our errand."

"I do n't know as I am one to get riled without reasons, Mr. Hodge. I can sense what you've come for. It's about my new adoption, I suppose."

"A-hem! Yes, we might put it that way. You know the sentiment of our town people against harboring Negroes, do n't you?"

"You might as well put it stronger than mere sentiment, Hodge," suggested Judge Horine. "It's an old and well-established ordinance of Payson Bend, that 'no person shall sell or rent property to a Negro, nor employ or *harbor* one.'"

"Yes, yes; quite right. Well put in, Judge. You see it is our embarrassing duty, on behalf of our town, to call your attention to that important

ordinance, Miss Lane. We understood at first that it was doubtful whether or not your—the incumbent on your hands, would live; but late reports incline us to believe that it is thriving at a great rate under your excellent care. To come to the point: Do n't you think, as a law-abiding citizen, you ought to respect the article our ancestors framed, and allow proper authorities to remove the objectionable inmate from your home?"

"I want to do what's right, Mr. Hodge. But I reckon you and me do n't agree as to what is *my* Christian duty."

"Indeed, it is a matter of regret if you are not fully informed of right living, Miss Lane. It is one of the first demands of the Christian that he live in peace and harmony with his fellows."

"I know, I've read something like that in the Bible. It sounds well, and I do try to live just that way with my neighbors when they'll let me."

"But you can sin against your neighbors in your own home by refusing to conform to their wishes and to the recognized rulings of the community. You should study Christian ethics."

"Well, I read in the Bible every night before I go to bed, and I do n't feel that I've ever done any great sin against my neighbors. I want to be friendly with everybody. Maybe I do n't study good books like I ought to, but I go to Church regular to hear the sermons, and I stay for class-meeting afterwards to learn all I can from what the salt of the Church tell about the ups and downs they have

as they go along the road to heaven. It's mighty touching to hear them. They're mostly old folks, with a few steady middle-aged ones and a sprinkling of young joiners. I never see you at class-meeting, Mr. Hodge. I asked Mrs. Clayton why more of the good Church folks did n't stay, and spoke of you in particular."

"A-hem! Well, I'm superintendent of the Sunday-school, and besides that I usually have to assist in the morning Church service, so I'm rather tired and feel justified in going home at the close of the sermon. But I suppose Mrs. Clayton explained my position to you."

"Yes, but she made things out a mite different."

"What did she say?" inquired Mr. Hodge, affably.

"Well, I do n't know as you'd be interested, and perhaps she did n't mean for me to mention what she said."

"I'll take the responsibility of that. Mrs. Clayton is a pretty good friend of mine, and would hit the truth as near as she could, I think. I'd like to know what she said."

"Well, if you can't rest easy, I reckon I'll have to tell you. She said when the preacher called on you to pray just after his sermon, you prayed so long and so loud you was too wore out to stay; and when he called on some one else in place of you, you was so mad you was n't fit to stay. That's about all she said. You do make mighty fine prayers, Mr. Hodge. I can't seem to find words fast enough to be a good

pray-er, so I have to be satisfied to be one of the common working sort of Christians. I take it God made me for that, and I try to live and act according to my light. When I tackle a job of what I think is right, I keep to it till I get through with it. I told Rhody Despard I'd stick to her baby as long as it needed a friend, and I'm going to do it."

Mr. Hodge was incapable of continuing the argument immediately, but Professor Bentley took up the task:

"Your charitable character is well known, Miss Lane. Your reputation as the benefactress of the helpless has been well earned and merits our highest esteem; but it hardly justifies your present defiance of an ordinance it is your bounden duty to respect."

"In plain words, you mean I have n't any right to keep Liberty,—that's the name of this baby here in the rocking-chair."

"Yes, that is what we mean. But do n't misconstrue our protest into any personal desire on our part to intrude upon your affairs. You have Robbie on your hands,—it would seem that the care of him was a sufficient tax upon your sympathy and patience and generosity."

"I suppose I'm the best judge of what I can afford, and as for sympathy and patience with the helpless, I never allow mine to be hooped up like a bucket that can't give a little without bursting. A body's conscience ought to be hooped up so it can't spread out too much; but sympathy and patience for motherless babies ought to be like Indian rubber, or

something that stretches more yet. I love Robbie more than I can measure; but my heart's big enough for Liberty, too."

"You do n't propose to raise those two children as equals, do you?" questioned Mr. Hodge, who was now primed for another encounter. "That would be an outrage to Robbie and to your race. The very Scriptures make a distinction between the races. In Genesis we read: 'Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.' Of course you know that one of Noah's sons was Ham, a black man, and the father of Canaan?"

"Yes, I've read about it. Old Noah got drunk and kicked off his clothes, and Ham saw his nakedness and sort of made fun of his father to his brothers, Shem and Japheth. Well, that was a mean thing for Ham to do. It's never right for children to make light of their parents. And if Noah had been sick and out of his head when he kicked his clothes off, I'd feel different; but I take it if a fellow is low down enough to get drunk and lay himself liable to get in 'most any fix, he ought to suffer for it. Noah did wrong to cuss his boy the way he did. I never did have much pity for folks that get mad and cuss somebody else for what comes of their own doings. It was Noah that cursed Ham—not God—and it is n't fair to make Ham's descendants suffer for it."

"But the condemnation will remain forever," argued Judge Horine. "Ham's sacrilege was an index of his moral caliber, and his descendants re-

tain the heritage of mental and moral degradation as well as the black skins he bequeathed them. They are unfit—incapable of anything but the lowest servitude.”

“Well, there were white men in Bible times that did things a heap worse than what Ham did, and nobody makes much fuss about it. Everybody has some good points I take it, and it is n’t fair to judge a body unless you can measure his good points along with his bad ones. There was n’t room in the Scriptures to tell all about Ham, and so we ought not to judge him all bad because he did one mean thing. He had some smartness I reckon, or he would n’t have had a land of his own. I suppose Egypt was his land, and nobody can say it was n’t him or his children that built some of the great things that used to be up and down and round about the River Nile. It is n’t for us to know who was at the bottom of some of the odds and ends that nobody can account for in Egypt, nor why or when some of Ham’s children strayed off into the wild places of Africa, and lived with beasts and like them, till they got blacker and worse looking than Ham ever was. I do n’t suppose the poor fellow would know his own kinfolks if he could see them to-day. If we’d all take hold and help to get the whole lot of them into the way of learning and decent living, they would get to be a sight better looking and acting by and by.”

“A great deal might be said on that subject, Miss Lane, but the Negro will never be anything more

than a Negro," asserted Judge Horine, a trifle impatiently.

"It is n't words—it's *works* that's going to help the colored folks along. But we've all got to own up to one thing. Ham and Shem and Japheth were brothers, and we all come down from one or the other of them, so we're all kinfolks—black and white. Things might be worse than they are. There's just one God at the head of things, and He knows why things are in such a mess. I take it He sent Liberty to me to take care of, and all the curses of old Noah can't hinder me from keeping the promise I made to poor Rhody Despard when she lay dying out in my stable loft."

"Why, the very manner of the child's birth bears out that ancient curse!" declared Mr. Hodge, desperately. "Its mother recognized the fact that she was too inferior to claim or receive any better shelter than the habitation of beasts. She sought a stable and gave birth to her young befitting its rank."

"Sakes alive, Mr. Hodge, I suppose just for the minute you've forgot the Babe that was born in the stable at Bethlehem!" exclaimed Miss Lane, with sudden gentleness in her tones. "I reckon we all forget things, sometimes. I take it a body's got to fight forgetfulness and dirt and selfishness as long as they stay in this mortal world. But about the Babe at Bethlehem—Robbie and me were going over the story Christmas eve, and after we got to the end Robbie says: 'Liberty was born in a stable, too. Did God bring her, or send an angel down from

heaven with her?' 'He sent an angel,' says I. 'I saw one go up from the pile of straw where I found her.' 'Was it a black angel?' says Robbie. 'Yes, it was a black one,' says I.

"Then the little fellow got out of my lap, where I'd been mothering him, and stood by the rocking-chair looking at Liberty. She was sleeping mighty sweet and peaceful, and by and by he bent down and kissed her for the first time. I was sort of flustered, and when he came back to my arms, I asked, 'What made you kiss Liberty, Robbie?' "'Cause she came from heaven. I did n't know God made black angels before. All the pictures of Jesus and the angels are white; but if a black angel brought Liberty, then God made her black on purpose, and I'm going to love her just like Johnnie Lee loves his little sister. Why did n't God make Liberty white?' he asked. 'Well,' says I, 'there's things God do n't want us to know till we get to heaven, and that's one of them. Maybe He meant it as a great favor to send Liberty just as she is. She's a sort of Christmas present, only she came a month ahead of time. The angels brought Lina—Mrs. Radcliffe—a baby girl to-day; it's white. Maybe she'll swap if you'd rather, Robbie,' I said, to try the little fellow. But he bounced off my lap again and grabbed hold of Liberty's little hands and said: 'I would n't swap Liberty for any baby, Aunt Hilda, 'cause I s'pect God's watching us, and would have His feelings hurt if we did n't like the present He sent us!'

"After Robbie was in bed asleep I thought over

what he had said. I had meant to do my full duty by Liberty, but it came to me all at once that I did n't have the same feeling for her I had for Robbie and other white children. I had n't felt any call to kiss her, nor to mother her close to my bosom. I had kept her in the rocking-chair at night close to my bed so I could reach out and rock her if she got restless; but Robbie had slept in my arms from the time I fetched him, a mite of a baby, from the poor-house. Well, while I was thinking that night, what with it being Christmas eve and me going over in my mind what Robbie had said, I got mightily stirred up. And things got worse when Liberty woke up and lay there blinking her bright eyes at me and stretching her mouth in a broad grin. I never did see such friendly, coaxing ways as she had that night. I got things ready for the night, and then I took the little thing into my arms and went to bed with her hugged close to my bosom. The poor little thing snuggled against me, and stuck one little fist in the jam of my neck, and sort of settled down with a sigh of content, like a young bird under its mother's wing. I've never been one of the crying sort. I take it that it is n't any use to cry over things I can help—I'd rather pitch in and do what I can to right them. And it is n't a mite of use to cry over things I can't help. But my feelings got the whip hand of me just then, and I burst out crying, and sat up in bed and hugged Liberty's little black face up to mine and kissed her time and again. I'm nothing great for praying, but then and there

I said to the Lord: 'It's Christmas eve, Lord, and this is Hilda Lane that's talking. I wish you'd please bear in mind that I've set out this minute to treat the little black baby you've put into my hands just the same as if it was my own flesh and blood. And I wish you'd please treat me from this time on according to the way I do by Liberty Despard.' Well, from that minute I've had a mothering feeling for this baby the same as for Robbie and others.

"I don't like to go against the wishes of my neighbors. I never would have brought a black baby here where it was n't welcome; but you see, Liberty was born here. She was n't fetched by any doings of mine. I take it God knew the lay of the land when He turned poor Rhody's feet into my gate. But I am not breaking any ordinance. You forgot part of it when you was saying it over, Judge. It says: 'No person shall sell or rent property to a Negro; nor employ, maintain, or harbor one, *within the town limits of Payson Bend.*' And I suppose you must have forgotten the *cross road between my property and the town limits.*

"I've told you how I feel about Liberty. I'd rather be friendly with everybody if they'll let me do my duty in peace. And now I've said all I've got to say about the business you men came for."

"Then your conscience is clear of offense against the community, is it?" asked Mr. Hodge, haughtily.

"Yes. The main points of my religion keep my mind calm and steady in my duty. One point is for

me to do the best I can by the duty that's closest to me, and it fits the other point. I always try to bear in mind that Jesus said, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.' That's the gist of my religion, and I'm trying to live up to it."

Without further argument the three gentlemen took their departure from Hilda Lane's cottage. Their protest had been made in vain.

VII.

A BATTLE OVER THE STARS AND STRIPES.

THE Payson house stood well back from the highway on a slight rise of ground, and was approached by a smoothly-graveled, tree-sheltered driveway, which also served as a footpath. Directly opposite this entrance, on the other side of the street, Miss Lane's gate opened upon the path to her cottage. Childish feet now kept a well-trodden path across the road from one gate to the other, for Liberty Despard and Victory Radcliffe, scarce a month apart in age, were intimate friends and the daily sharers of each other's playthings. Robbie Lane, now twelve years old, had also a particular companion in Eric Horine, the only child of Judge Horine, who lived opposite the cross-road from Miss Lane on the east.

It was the summer prior to the sixth birthdays of the two little girls that the first serious encounter took place between them. The difficulty arose over a discarded chair-flag which Jerry Payson had replaced with a new one, and the disagreement aroused in both children a sense of racial difference never before consciously considered by either.

It was the first day of July. Jerry Payson sat in his chair on the front veranda waiting to have his new flag adjusted to the staff on his chair. Victory came dancing out of the front door with her doll in one hand and her sunbonnet in the other. She was a very charming tot, and generally sweet-tempered. Even Andy Peters, who was crusty and given to faultfinding, seldom found anything to disapprove in the child.

"Where are you going, Victory?" asked Jerry Payson.

"Over to Liberty's."

"Well, you wait a bit. Go and tell Andy to come and take this old flag off the staff so you can take it with you. You can let Liberty have a half interest in it."

Andy came as bidden, and presently Victory ran down the driveway screaming to Liberty, who had appeared at the opposite gate:

"O Liberty, Liberty! see what Uncle Jerry gave us. It's his old flag. See, it's for us to keep!"

The scorching sun poured down upon the road, and of one accord the children wavered from their course to meet at the big Payson corner-stone under the grateful shelter of the giant oak.

"What're we going to do with it, Victory?" asked Liberty, catching up a fold of the flag and fingering it admiringly.

"Uncle Jerry said you could have half, so we'll 'vide it."

"O yes, 'course."

With much seriousness the pair doubled the banner crossways of the stripes, but discovering that the starry blue space was all on one end they made a second attempt at a fair division by folding it lengthwise of the stripes, but the result was the same.

"Well, it's got to be 'vided this way," announced Victory, after a final perplexed survey of the situation. "You take hold right here and pull that way, and I'll pull this way. It'll tear 'zactly in the middle, and *that* half'll be yours."

"But that'll make all the stars come on your piece, Victory," objected Liberty, turning her round head, with its adornment of small beribboned braids, from side to side as her keen eyes took in the proposed division.

"Well, can't you see it's got to be that way? I s'pect you ought to be glad to get half the stripes. It's *my* Uncle Jerry's flag anyhow. Pull, I tell you!"

"I won't 'thout I can have some stars! It's my Uncle Jerry too."

"'Taint so!" declared Victory, angrily. "He could n't be, 'cause you're a black girl."

"It's just the outside of me. Aunt Hilda says I'm 'zactly like you on the inside!"

"'Taint so! I ain't like you, I'm white all the way through. Andy says you're nothing but a nigger! You let go of my flag, I tell you!"

"I won't let go!" cried Liberty, defiantly, trying to wrench the bunting from Victory's grasp. "Your

Uncle Jerry said I could have half. You 're a—a—cry baby cripsy!"

"Let go, you little, black nigger pig!" screamed Victory, with flashing eyes. And then the battle began in earnest.

It was a desperate encounter. Victory was slighter, but more lithe and active than Liberty, who was stronger. Each was determined to get entire possession of the flag, and tugged and fought to that end. Victory's shrill screams and Liberty's howls fretted the atmosphere in concert.

Robbie Lane and Eric Horine were in the top of a June apple-tree back of the cottage, and being nimble and fleet of foot they soon reached the scene of the conflict; but when Robbie made a move to separate the combatants, Eric—highly entertained, and a follower of boyish tactics—demanded "hands off and fair play." Robbie persisted, however, and so found himself in the midst of an engagement with Eric, which rivaled the one already in progress.

Andy Peters, who was adjusting the new flag to Jerry's chair staff, dropped his handful of brass clamps at Victory's first scream and ran to the driveway, where the view was less obstructed by trees, to see what was wrong.

"O lordy, Jerry," he said, "them youngsters are having a pitch battle over that old flag of yours." He ran on down to the gate, and cried excitedly:

"Hold on to it, Victory! Do n't be beat out by a darky!"

In vain Jerry Payson called to Victory from the

veranda, and Miss Lane to Liberty from an upstairs window of the cottage, where she was in the midst of her afternoon toilet. Their voices were lost in the confusion.

"Hold your own, Victory! Don't you give up to a pesky nigger!" was Andy's oft-repeated encouragement to the one and incitement to the other.

Neither of the girls was gaining any advantage over the other, till suddenly Liberty let go of the flag with one hand and caught Victory's long, glossy braids, pulling her head backwards with a vicious jerk. Thereupon Victory also let go of the trophy with one hand and clutched Liberty by several small pink-ribboned pigtails. The maneuver was unfortunate for both, for the Stars and Stripes now swept the ground full length and tripped the lusty opponents, who fell into the dust, struggling with increasing anger and clamor.

At this juncture Miss Lane, exasperated by the necessity for active interference, arrived at the affray with a patchwork quilt thrown around her, which failed to conceal her bombazine petticoat, or the evidence of her toilet having been interrupted after the removal of one speckled stocking and leather slipper had been replaced with a white hose and a black cloth gaiter. But her singular appearance did not prevent the effectiveness of her movements. She promptly lifted the fallen foes to their feet, wrenched the soiled and torn flag from their clinging fingers, and, deftly rolling it into a ball, tossed it over into the Payson yard. Then bidding Robbie

to follow, she faced Liberty about and marched homeward.

Victory, still screaming with excitement and anger, recovered the treasure, and then ran up the driveway straight to Jerry Payson, who held out his arm to receive and clasp her to his side, where she hid her tear-wet face against his shoulder and, with her dirty little hands clasped around his neck, sobbed out her anguish. Her blue frock was soiled and rumpled, her dimpled arms scratched, and her lately combed hair half unbraided and minus a ribbon.

Andy Peters came up to the veranda, convulsed with laughter, closely followed by Eric Horine.

"The battle 's over, Jerry, and nary a one killed. Nary side licked, but the enemy was captured by the queen of the Fiji Islands. O lordy! did you see the way Hilda swooped down on them youngsters, set them right end up, confiscated the flag, and flung it over the pickets of the foe? Haw, haw, haw! She marched off the field with nary a button on her uniform that I could see, and nary a feather in her topknot; but she fetched one foot down in a slipper and the other in a gaiter, as proud as Yankee Doodle! O lordy! Haw, haw, haw! Her right wing was black as thunder, but her rear guard fetched up with nary a weapon missing, except one suspender and a wristband off of one shirt-sleeve."

"You ought to be ashamed to egg Victory on that way, Andy. It is n't right or neighborly to hiss on a fuss like that," said Jerry Payson, sternly.

"O lordy, Jerry, all 's fair in love and war, you

know. I had to help on this side. Hilda was general of the retreat on the other side. Haw, haw, haw! She was rigged up like a Tartar on a warship with her sails a-flying."

"How did the fuss start, Victory?" asked Eric, whose boyish curiosity was fully aroused.

"Did n't appear to be any start," interposed Andy. "The whole army jumped into the middle of the fight, did n't it, Victory?"

"Let Victory alone till she gets calmed down. And I guess you might go downtown and get the groceries Peggy spoke about," suggested Jerry Payson, meaningly.

"Well, I'll water the critters first. I suppose you do n't want me to finish fixing your new flag before I go," replied Andy, who was in no hurry to go downtown.

"I forgot the flag; you can finish it after you water the stock."

Andy disappeared around the house, and Victory's sobs gradually ceased. Presently she lifted her head to see if Eric had gone. But he was sitting on the edge of the porch quietly awaiting developments. He wanted to hear the whole story before he went away.

Andy Peters timed his return from the stable so as to meet Miss Lane, who came up the drive presently, flushed with the heat, and a trifle disturbed in mind. He grinned and called out while she was yet some distance away:

"How 's your nigger, Hilda? And where 's that

jimcracker of a mantiller you had on at your last sally?"

"I did n't come over here to talk about bedquilts, Andy. I came to get the straight of that fight, so I'll know how to do by Liberty. She told her side, but I take it, no matter how honest a body, is, there's bound to be different points of view. I want to hear Victory's side now. Come here, pettie, and tell Aunt Hilda how the trouble started out."

Victory loved Miss Lane, and willingly sat on her lap and told her little tale of woe. Her audience listened attentively. After explaining the primary cause of the trouble, she paused and hung her head.

"I guess I'm to blame for the fuss," said Jerry Payson. "I did n't mean for you to tear the flag in two pieces, Victory. I meant for you and Liberty to play with it together as it was. That's what I meant by giving her a half interest. But I reckon things are n't past mending, are they, Hilda?"

"No, I guess not," replied the woman, hugging Victory closer to her. "Did you and Liberty say ugly things to each other, pettie?"

"Liberty did. She said she was just like me inside, and that my Uncle Jerry was hers too. She said the black was only on the outside of her."

Andy stuffed his bandana into his mouth and shuffled around the corner of the house, out of range of all but Eric, whom he edified with various demonstrations of delight over the child's recital.

"What did *you* say, pettie?" asked Miss Lane, soberly.

"I said she was n't like me. And I told her Uncle Jerry could n't be hers 'cause she's black. She called me a cry baby cripsy, and I only said she was a little black nigger pig!" admitted the child between her sobs, while great tears rolled down her muddy cheeks.

Andy fell to choking at this admission, and Eric smothered his mirth with difficulty.

"Was that all?" queried Miss Lane, gently.

"Yes, I s'pect so. We *fitted* then."

Andy swayed back and forth in glee, and Eric laughed aloud. But Miss Lane said gravely:

"Well, your story and Liberty's are as near alike as they could be, I guess. And I do n't see but what one got as bad scratched and messed up as the other. But it's so about you and Liberty being alike on the inside, Victory. God made you alike, except your skins and features. Liberty can't help being black any more than you can help being white."

"I do n't want to help it. God did n't make Liberty, 'cause Andy says the bad man made niggers out of monkeys!" declared the child.

"O lordy!" moaned Andy, holding his sides, while Eric hung his head and giggled outright.

"Andy gets things mixed some, pettie."

"But she ain't as good as me, and she can't fly up to heaven, 'cause angels are white."

"Can't black birds fly the same as white ones, Victory? God makes white birds and black birds, and folks the same way."

Victory meditated a moment, and then renewed her complaint:

"Liberty was naughty. The piece with the stripes was good enough for her, 'cause she's nothing but a nigger."

"O lordy, you hold to that ideer, Victory!" cried Andy. "Stripes are for the niggers every time. That's what they got in slave times—plenty of stripes and nary a star!"

"You shut up, Andy!" commanded Jerry Payson, impatiently. "What makes you try to poison the child's mind that way for?"

"Yes," said Miss Lane, "what good does such talk do you, Andy? It's getting mighty low down for a man to nag on a fight between children. To do that and to bemean a poor little orphan like Liberty shows a meaner spirit than I gave you credit for. I don't want you to call Liberty names like that again."

"When a thing's black it's no harm to call it black. And there's such a thing as mixing up black and white more than the Almighty set out to do. I wish every pesky nigger was at the bottom of the lake of fire and brimstone!" declared Andy, sitting down on the veranda at his favorite corner.

"Sakes alive, Andy, haven't you got plenty of room in the world?" asked Miss Lane. "Are the colored folks crowding you in particular?"

"'Tain't because of room. It's because I believe in the survival of the fittest!"

"You do? Well, I know white folks that are liv-

ing this minute that are n't any more fit to survive than the cholera or the smallpox. If God did n't want the Negroes to survive, I take it He could get rid of them without your judgment on them, Andy," replied the woman.

"Well, according to that ideer, there was n't any call for you to set Payson Bend folks to snorting and buzzing by keeping that little black imp under their noses. I reckon she would have pulled through somehow, if the Almighty 'lowed for her to."

"He put her into my hands, and trusted my care to help her along."

"Let's talk about something else now," interposed Jerry Payson. "There's young eyes and ears wide open pretty close round."

"A country that's free for niggers ought to be free for a white man to speak his mind in," mumbled Andy, who was not easily suppressed. "I reckon I've got some rights, even if the world has been against me all my life."

"Well, maybe you and me have both been too free with our tongues, Andy," said Miss Lane, "and I'm willing to quit, but I'll wind up by saying that it is n't right for you to set children against folks that never did you any harm."

"Never done me no harm? Why, the whole pack of them are a set of thieves and robbers. No harm? Why, one of the pesky black scamps stole a hair watch chain from me when I was down South. Yes, mam, a chain I would n't have taken a hundred dollars for."

"A hair watch chain? Is that the heft of what you've got against the Negroes?"

"Ain't it a plenty? I've got a right to hate the whole pack of black skins!"

"What sort of hair was the chain? horse hair?"

"No. It was some hair I cut off of a girl's head when I was a young fellow going to singing schools. It was about the color yours was then, Hilda," replied the man, grimly.

"Sakes alive, it was n't much for looks then; but it was a harrowing thing to have it stolen. I do n't blame you for not liking the one that took it, but it is n't fair to blame the whole tribe for what one of them did."

"Do n't begin a fresh argument, Andy," said Jerry Payson, uneasily. "Peggy needs that sugar tolerable quick now."

"Let her want it, you old, one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged Bluecoat! Do you think all you've got to do is to sit there grinning under your pesky flag and boss me around? If old Abe's nigger lark had n't made mincemeat of you already, I'd mash your mouth!" retorted Andy, fiercely.

"You go away from here!" screamed Victory, running at Andy and pounding him with her small fists. "I'll kick you if you hurt my Uncle Jerry!"

"Come here, Victory," commanded Jerry Payson. "Let Andy be; his bark is a heap worse than his bite."

Andy strode over to the twisted up flag that had caused the disturbance, and which Victory had left

on the floor beside her uncle's chair, and gave it a vicious kick that sent it whirling out into the driveway. Victory renewed her screams and dashed after it, but Eric Horine was before her, and catching up the desecrated banner faced about with flashing eyes, exclaiming:

"If I was big enough I'd thrash you for that, Mr. Peters! I think you're right in some ways on the nigger question, but when it comes to insulting our flag, why *that's* a different thing!"

"Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!" shouted Jerry Payson, gleefully.

"But drat the niggers!" growled Andy, wrathfully, jerking a clay pipe from his pocket and dashing it to fragments on the stone slab below the steps.

"Well, I guess I'll go up stairs and see Lina and Peggy before I go home," remarked Miss Lane, calmly, as she rose and made good her words. Andy looked after her with a change slowly coming over his countenance. Presently he began to pick up the brass clamps lying on the floor.

"I'll finish fixing that new flag, Jerry, and then I'll go and get the groceries for Peggy," he said, pacifically.

"All right, Andy; and while you're getting things you'd best get a dozen new pipes," replied Jerry, good humoredly.

"What made you smash your old pipe, Mr. Peters?" asked Eric, wondering at the sudden clearing of the atmosphere.

"Well, you see, Eric," explained Andy, deliber-

ately, "I get so pesky mad sometimes I've got to smash something to keep from busting. I get ca'm then. And my pipe's the handiest thing to smash. I reckon the show's over for this time. If you're in a hurry you can go home now."

"But I'm in no hurry. I'll help Victory straighten out her flag first," replied the boy, coolly.

"I'm going to cut off the stars for me, and let Liberty have all of the stripes, if stripes b'long to niggers," declared Victory.

"But they don't, Victory; and besides it would n't be our National flag with just stars, nor with just stripes. And I think it's an awful thing to tear up a flag,—it's nearly treason, and almost as bad as tearing up a Bible. It is an insult to our Government!"

Victory stared up into the face of her boy friend with awe-stricken countenance, not comprehending his words, but sure they were freighted with wonderful significance. Her respect for her country's flag increased at once. Jerry Payson had listened with interest.

"Eric," he said, "you've got the right stuff in you to make a good soldier, and your ideas are tall a plenty, but they are n't broad enough."

"What do you mean by that, sir?" asked the puzzled lad.

"Well, by the last part I mean your ideas of what's right don't spread out broad enough to cover the thirteenth and fifteenth articles of the amendments. I guess your father's to blame for

that, though. You look in your history, in the last part of the Constitution, and you 'll see what I mean. But you 've got the right idea about the flag. It 's the prettiest thing on earth to my notion, and I believe you 'd fight and bleed and die, if need be, to keep it floating. Not because of its stars and stripes, but for the things it stands for."

"Yes, sir, I would, because it stands for everything we prize the most in America—rights, protection, liberty, and victory!" replied the boy, with patriotism glowing in his face and ringing in his voice.

"Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!" shouted the old soldier, exultantly.

"But drat the niggers!" breathed Andy, in a stage whisper.

With sudden alacrity Victory spread the much abused banner on the grass, and then stood gazing at its battle-marked stars and stripes meditatively.

"Shall I tack it on a pole for you before I go home?" asked Eric, presently.

"I do n't want it on a pole. Show me which part is Liberty and which is me."

"Whatever do you mean, Victory?"

"Why, you said the flag meant lots of things, and Liberty and me, did n't you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jerry Payson. "There 's other kinds of liberty and victory besides little girls. It takes the whole flag to mean liberty, and the whole thing to mean victory; you can't get them apart. I tell you what we 'll do, Victory. We 'll

swing that flag out under the Payson oak in the middle of the road, and you and Liberty can meet there and make up, and play 'Rally Round the Flag.' You'll both have the whole flag then and equal rights. Will that suit you?"

"Yes, I s'pect so," replied the child, interpreting the compromise in her own way, and relieved to have the difficulty settled. "Let's put it there now, Eric."

"I reckon I'd best help and have the job done right," mumbled Andy, who had finished his task.

"Just wheel me down there, too, Andy. It'll have to be swung just to clear the ground, and fixed handy to take down of nights. The fun of it'll soon wear out, then we'll put it up in the garret with the others that have worn out in service."

The banner soon hung with its bright length downwards under the famous tree. Andy wheeled Jerry Payson back to the house, and then went on his way to the store. Victory ran to the cottage to find Liberty and declare peace. But Eric Horine, full of boyish curiosity, hid behind the big rock and waited to hear what terms the little girls would make over it.

The pair soon arrived almost breathless from running. Victory proceeded to explain the situation:

"Uncle Jerry didn't mean for us to 'vide the flag in two pieces, 'cause it takes all of one side to mean me, and all of the other side to mean you!"

"O yes—course," agreed Liberty, with utter blankness in her countenance.

"And so you 'll have to live on your side, and I 'll live on mine; but we can go visiting, and 'sides we can play 'Rally Round the Flag!'"

"O yes—course," was the prompt response. "You like me now, do n't you?"

"I have to, Liberty," replied Victory, solemnly. "God made white birds and black birds 'cause He wanted to, and folks that way, too. But He likes white folks best 'cause He made flags for them, only He makes them 'vide their flags with the niggers; He did n't make any just on purpose for niggers, you know."

"Of course, not. Why did n't He?"

"I do n't know, but I s'pect He did n't have stuff enough, or mebbby the niggers were too naughty. If they 'll be good for a long, long time I s'pect He will."

Liberty shook her beribboned head doubtfully, and the tears that had slowly gathered in her eyes rolled down her cheeks in melancholy drops.

"Do n't cry, Liberty," said Victory, regretting the things that were, and picking up the hem of her dress to wipe away the other's tears, "you 're made just like me inside anyhow, you know. Mebbby you 'll fade out white if you 'll be good a long time, 'cause look, the inside of your hands and the bottoms of your feet are fady now."

"Will I get white like you?" asked Liberty, hopefully.

"I said, *mebbby*. I do n't know for sure. I 'll ask

Andy—he knows lots about niggers. Let's play visiting now."

"O yes—course. Which is my side of the flag?" asked the child, comparing both sides of the banner critically, and finally lifting a fold of the bunting to examine the lapped edges.

"The side next Aunt Hilda's house, of course," said Victory.

"Which is the wrong side?" questioned Liberty, suspiciously.

"There is n't any wrong side to a flag, Liberty," responded Victory, severely. "It's only *wrong folks* that s'pects there is!"

"O, course!" responded the little black girl, dropping the bunting and her doubts instantly.

There was a whoop from behind the rock, and Eric Horine, delighted at Victory's aptness, rushed forward and, catching her under the arms, swung her lithe body around in a series of circles.

"There, little patriot!" he exclaimed, when at last he stood her on her feet dizzy from the whirl, and dropped on one knee beside her, "you're the cunningest little thing I èver saw, Victory!"

The child put her arms around his neck to steady herself a moment, and allowed him to kiss her rosebud lips repeatedly.

"I s'pect Liberty's cunning too," she suggested magnanimously. "Do her this way now, Eric."

"I have n't time just now. I've got to hurry home and hunt up something in my history," replied

the boy, running away with a comical grin on his merry face.

And thus the days of childhood, sometimes briefly clouded, but always clear at sunset, were told off to the children that played about the old Payson corner-stone. Played and battled through miniature comedies and tragedies; loved and hated each other; sported and broke their brittle toys; sang with the birds; brooded with thought; questioned, developed, wearied of childish things, and set their faces toward higher and more enduring ideals.

The girls, each more and more fully occupied with duties, studies, and separate interests, naturally drifted away from the habit of daily companionship. Liberty was debarred from the public school and from all social advantages in Payson Bend. But Robert, always thoroughly in earnest, led her through the graded school course with rigid exaction at home; and a music teacher came from H—— every week for years to develop the child's marked talent for music.

But between Robert Lane and Eric Horine the intimacy begun in early childhood continued until after they had taken their university degrees together, and diverging paths did not weaken their friendship.

VIII.

A MORNING IN MAY.

It was a brilliant May morning. Nearly fifteen years had passed since the hot July day which had witnessed the childish battle over the Stars and Stripes. During the interval Payson Bend had received the stimulus of a railroad along its western border, and had prospered accordingly.

The old Payson place remained much the same as of yore. True, the trees had grown more stately, and a few red garden benches scattered about the lawn lent brighter touches of color than its older somberness afforded. The sedate mansion also revealed evidences of a progressive spirit domiciled within. Up-to-date window shades and dainty lace draperies replaced the old blue paper curtains, and the broad veranda was graced with various furnishings—a low table, some rockers, a gayly colored hammock, several handsome pot plants, and across the west end a luxuriant rosebush climbed and sent out fragrant streamers at its own sweet will.

Amid these newer trifles the familiar figure of Jerry Payson in his roller chair, with the folds of a handsome flag touching the empty sleeve at his right side, dispelled any doubt as to who was now

master of the well-preserved residence. The sunny-hearted old soldier bore marks of time in the silvering hair that wreathed his finely-lined temples and forehead, but his cheeks were smooth and rosy, his single eye blue and merry, and his spirits were as buoyant as if the secret of eternal youth were his.

Another familiar figure in the foreground of the Payson place that bright May morning was that of Andy Peters, who was mowing the lawn and grumbling as usual. The years weighed heavily on him, as was evidenced in his bowed shoulders, stiff joints, and bristly white hair; and his face was deeply indexed by the bickerings and chafings of an unhappy spirit.

But how much more striking was the change the years had wrought in Victory Radcliffe, the handsome young woman of nearly twenty, who came through the wide doorway, drawing on a pair of white chamois gloves and humming a gay little melody. No need to wonder whose will instituted the later improvements about the premises, for Victory's genius was the charm and inspiration of her home.

Her simple white straw hat, blue print frock with spotless linen collar and muslin tie, suited her fresh complexion and fine form perfectly, and brought out the rich luster of her blue-black hair, straight eyebrows, and heavy lashes.

"Ta, ta, Uncle Jerry," she said, leaving a kiss on his forehead and hurrying away. "I'll have to skip or I'll be late, and that would be a disgrace for a

schoolteacher of my reputation. I've just four minutes to get there in. 'Ta, ta, Andy!'

Both men watched the girl out of sight with admiring glances. She was the one bright particular star within the horizon of each.

"I reckon God never did a finer job than when He made our Victory," remarked Jerry Payson when Andy had reached the end of a swath near the veranda.

"She's fine enough to look at, but she's mighty headstrong," responded Andy, gloomily, as he turned the mower about.

"You'd better rest a bit, Andy. Take that rocking-chair, you're just about tuckered out."

"Guess I will stop and take a smoke, but I'm nearly out of tobacco. I forgot to get some yesterday when I was at the store."

"As for Victory being headstrong—that don't hurt her a speck. It might if she didn't have so much sound sense and grit. She's made of the right stuff to keep her marching ahead, war or peace. O glory, what a soldier she'd make if she was a man!"

"There's no telling about that; she might n't be much after all. Loan me your hunk of chewing tobacco, Jerry. I'll have to shave off a little to piece out with. It is n't worth while to sit down to smoke a pipe half full. I wish you smoked instead of chewing, Jerry. This tobacco business would be a heap more company then."

"Maybe so, but I couldn't give up chewing.

Why, I can sit with my eyes shut and chew and chew and see sights 'way back in war times, till I feel like I'm marching along with my knapsack on my back and my canteen and other traps slugging against my side as plain as anything. Maybe you won't believe it, Andy, but there's times when I can actually feel the grip of my hand—the one that's off—around my musket, I can so—and hear the fifes and the drums and the steady tromp, tromp, tromp of the Boys in Blue. And see the old flag, gone to rags sometimes, but always a flying as proud as—O glory! Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!"

"But drat the niggers!" muttered Andy, softly.

"And there's times when I seem to be in battle, and I get cold and shaky, and my heart thumps like it did on the field when I'd see the boys falling right and left, and hear them groaning and begging for help, or praying for death, as their blood trickled out on the ground. I'd like to forget that part. And again I'm in camp where the boys are spinning yarns, or singing to forget how hungry they are and how far from home.' It makes the tears come to my eyes to this day to think how they'd get off a lot of unfeeling nonsense to make believe they were happy when every mother's son of them was nearly dead with homesickness and misery. I mind our camp at Cedar Creek that October day when—"

"O lordy, I suppose you do! You mean the day old Early's boys slipped up on you fellows and

swiped up your artillery and sent you flying sky west and crooked before you knew what ailed you. Haw, haw, haw! You forgot how to march on the road to Winchester. You Blue Coats loped over the ground like a pack of jack rabbits before a prairie fire!"

"I guess it did look that way from your point of view," replied Jerry Payson, with a good-natured laugh; "but you see we felt stirred to take a double quick, so to speak, till we met General Sheridan. But we got back to Middletown fast enough, too, I mind. You fellows in Gray had n't got done licking your chops after feed time when we sallied up and scared the daylights out of you. O glory, but that was a squelcher for Early's army."

"You bet it was! And there's where you and me came face to face the first time in battle, so far as we know, up to that time in the war, was n't it, Jerry? I mind the hitch I took in my breath when I saw you there not more than a dozen yards from the muzzle of my gun." Andy cast a swift glance at his companion as he finished, then gazed intently at the gables of Hilda Lane's cottage, only partly visible through the intervening foliage.

"Nothing's strange in war. But I did n't see you that time, you know. I'd like to forget that skirmish. It took my eye. I was off duty for a while after that."

"And your very next battle took your leg and arm, did n't it?" asked Andy, quietly, although they had gone over the story dozens of times.

"Yes. I was n't fit for duty yet, but I begged leave to go with my company."

"And you found old Early's army sort of resurrected again, did n't you?"

"Yes, sort of, but not spry enough yet to keep our plucky old Sheridan from licking it."

"*You* came pretty close to the River Jordan anyhow," declared Andy, doggedly.

"Tolerable close, yes. There 's where my right hand held a gun for the last time ; there 's where my left foot took its last step, and where my heart came near beating its last tattoo," replied Jerry Payson, with a gulp of emotion.

Andy knocked the ashes from his pipe, scarcely conscious of the act. His face was twitching painfully, but he continued to gaze at the gables of Miss Lane's cottage. "I reckon I'll have to get to work if I'm going to get done by noon," he remarked presently.

"I wish you'd let me hire Sam Hobbs to tend the lawn, Andy. He needs the wages, and he's better able than you. It grits on my feelings to see you work so hard."

"You need n't look at me if I'm such an aggravating show. But Sam Hobbs shan't touch this lawn. He'd spoil it first lick. I do n't know as I'm plumb played out yet."

"Well, you are n't as peart as you was that day at Cedar Creek."

"Nor you," retorted Andy, with a furtive glance at the other.

"That's a fact, but I've no notion of camping in a graveyard yet awhile. I've got a heap to be thankful for one way and another. God has done a good part by me in more than one way; so has Uncle Sam."

"You have n't got enough blessings to make up for what you've lost. The world's against you the same as me, Jerry, only you do n't seem to know it."

"It's according to how a body sizes things up whether I've lost more than I've got left. It do n't do to measure by the strength of an arm or the length of a leg. And besides, Andy, the members I gave up on the battlefield are n't lost; it's a pleasure to know that."

"Are n't lost? That's curious. I reckon it would take the Almighty to find them now, anyhow. Where are they, if they are n't lost?"

"Well, they're laid up in Government bonds, so to speak, and they're fetching in good interest. Of course, I'd rather be a whole man than to have the biggest pension a-going, but God left me one arm and hand to chase the flies off with and to lift grub to my mouth, and that's a blessing. And I've got one good eye to read the papers with, so I can feel happy over the news of how the country I helped save from splitting up and from the disgrace of slavery is marching on to bigger things every year, and that's a blessing. And it's worth a heap to be able to see my friends and the flag and growing things, and to look up in the sky where the edges

of things I can see now touch the edges of things I'll see by and by."

"I reckon you've forgot the tiresome job you've had sitting in a chair mostly for the rise of thirty-five years," muttered Andy.

"That's one of the things I set out to forget every day. The devil reminds me of it the first thing when I wake up in the morning and can't dress myself. He nudges me about it now and then through the day and when I'm getting ready for bed at night; but it's just by spells. I can almost forget it the most of the time. But what is n't tiresome if a body keeps it up? Why, I've laughed till my jaws ached and I was lame all over, but I never thought it such terrible hard work. And, besides my other blessings, I've got Peggy and Victory and Hilda and you, Andy. Did you ever think that you and me would n't have been living together like brothers all these years if it had n't been for the fix I'm in?"

A spasm of pain contracted Andy's features. He bent down and pulled some grass out from between the blades of the mower, ignoring the question.

"And then there's the wag of my tongue,—*that's* a blessing. It's mighty comforting to talk."

"I reckon we all like to wag our tongues, Jerry; but any fool can do that," replied Andy, reflectively.

"Yes, and they enjoy it just the same. But say, Andy, there's a dandelion in the next swath. It reminds me of when I was a boy and mother would

take me with her to get a mess of dandelion greens early in the spring, to cook with a piece of smoked jowl. My, but that was larruping good truck! I wish you 'd leave that posy; I've had my eye on it all morning. It's plumb sassy with yellowness."

"Well, it's going to get out of there root and head right now. I have n't worked all these years to get rid of the pesky things just to give them a fresh start. You're the worst fellow to see sights, Jerry."

"Maybe it's my way of looking at things. But that dandelion is yellower than common. I wish you 'd leave it. It's doing it's level best to make one little spot in the world bright and happy. That's all anybody or thing can do, I reckon."

"That is n't any sort of reason for leaving this pesky weed. I never found any spot in the world where I could be bright and happy. The whole concern's been against me all my life," replied the man, sullenly, as he pushed the mower over the innocent dandelion, leaving it crushed and quivering, its golden hour forever ended.

Miss Lane came in at the gate at that moment, saying cheerily:

"Your lawn looks finer than ever this year, do n't it, Andy?"

"Not a mite finer than last year, nor as fine. There was n't a dandelion in its last year."

"Sakes alive, I do n't see any now!"

"Well, you would if you 'd come a minute sooner. I just laid out one of the pesky things. You've got

a big crop of them in your back yard, I notice. I wish you'd bring a bunch of nice yellow ones to Jerry next time you come over. He's hankering for some."

"There's worse things than dandelions in the world, Andy," retorted the woman, going on her way. "Good morning, Jerry. I've got a letter from Robert."

"I guessed that. Robert's letters always show in your face somehow. Good news, I reckon?"

"Yes, leastwise if things come to pass as Robert wants them, it means pleasant times ahead for Liberty and me. It's about the schools here. Eric Horine is going to give up the principalship here, and wants Robert to take his place. Robert is going to send in his application this week. What do you think about it, Jerry?"

"I don't see any reason why he should n't get the position. He's a favorite with Payson Bend folks in general, and he's got the education and his two years' experience at Kingly. He ought to get in his bid pretty spry, though. The school board have their meeting to hire teachers before the month is out."

"Yes, Robert knows that, and Liberty is writing to him now to tell him how glad we'll be to have him home again."

"I thought Robert was fixing to be a preacher, Hilda?" remarked Mrs. Strong, who had brought her sewing out on the veranda. "Is he getting over that notion?"

"No, but he is n't ready yet. He is studying to be a preacher all the time he can spare from his teaching. He wants to go to a regular preachers' school in a year or two to finish up with. Then he 'll start out to preach, I reckon. That 's why I 'll be so glad to have him get the school here, so I can have him home for a while before he gets tied so he can't come and go as he pleases. It 'll be a great thing for Liberty, too. She got through with her high-school books last year, you know, and she 's working on some of Robert's college studies now and needs more help than he can very well give her by coming home twice a month like he does now. He makes her learn things mighty perfect, and puts her through what she 's got over every time he comes. She 's smart in books. She 'll be ahead of Victory in college books directly if she keeps on. But of course Victory 's been teaching two years, and that takes the place of study, I suppose."

"Yes, and Victory has chances to pick up a heap among folks and at places where Liberty can't go. We 'll be proud to have Robert and Victory both in our schools right at home; won't we, Hilda?" said Jerry Payson.

"We 'll have reasons to be. And Liberty has a notion of teaching when she gets her education finished, too. Only she 'll have to go among her own people to get a place. That 's what she wants to do—help the colored folks along. She 's chuck full of ideas of what she 'll do for them by and by. She did n't grow up in company with Robert and Vic-

tory and Flossie Bruce for nothing. She'd push them to keep pace with her, too, if she was n't black. When she was little, Robert had to nag at her some to keep her at her books, but she do n't need any pushing now. Her whole mind is bent on learning. She can sew and do all sorts of housework as good as I can, and besides all that she can get more music out of the piano than any girl in Payson Bend, if I do say it. She do n't take to some kinds of music, maybe, but when she sings to her playing it always seems to me she's got the sort of judgment in picking her pieces that strikes into the heart and soul of what's best. She's got high notions of what her people can be brought to, and she thinks it'll be plainer to them that other black girls can be made into something, if she proves it by herself. I hate to think of the time she'll leave me, but I won't lay a straw in her way. I gave her a thousand dollars the day she was eighteen, the same as I did my other adoptions, and she'll have that to help her through college. I'll see to it she has plenty of clothes, and my home will be hers to come to as long as I live. I look for her to do great things for her race, and I'd like to live long enough to see her ideas worked out."

"A nigger's no business with ideers!" declared Andy Peters, who had paused in his work as he neared the veranda. "It's bad enough to have them free to gad over the country amongst their betters, without setting them up to feel like they're better than white folks."

"I take it a colored girl with high notions that she lives up to as well as she can is better than a white person with low down notions that they more than live out. Liberty's ideas run on ways to make her folks better, and she do n't waste time thinking and saying mean things about the people that brought misery on her race."

"Well," interposed Jerry Payson, "I've never forgot what Rhody Despard did for one of my blood. I did n't have a chance to do her a good turn, but I've got my eye on Liberty. When she gets ready to work out some of her notions, I'll look them over and put my name to a piece of paper that'll help her along."

"Thank you, Jerry," said Miss Lane. "I never thought you had *forgotten*, but it goes to my heart to hear you speak such words."

"No, I never was one to forget a favor," replied the man as Andy passed out of hearing again. "That's why I've stood by Andy in spite of things. He did me a mighty good turn once when we were boys."

"La me, Jerry, what did he ever do for you that he has n't had full pay for?" asked Mrs. Strong.

"You've heard me tell it, Peggy. It was above the old rock mill-dam on Shoal Creek. We were swimming in water twenty feet deep, when I took the cramps and went under like a chunk of lead. Andy heard me make a strange noise and dived after me and towed me ashore. He rubbed and slapped me for half an hour before I was at myself again.

He's got a claim on me I can't forget, because of thinking of that time, when he gets to acting up like he does now and then. I don't believe he's half so unfeeling as he lets on sometimes."

"Well, I do n't blame you for overlooking things for such reasons, Jerry. There's debts a body can't ever pay up in full. But I do think you've taken a heap off of Andy. I did n't know before how you brought yourself to bear it," said Miss Lane.

"Well, I'm free to own up that he does say things that're a mite hard to swallow; but I can generally keep still, and that's the best when he's riled."

"Sakes alive, it is n't what's best, it's what's handiest that I'm liable to grab at when he sets his tongue on me. It's a sight handier for me to give him a piece of my mind than to keep my mouth shut," declared Miss Lane with a laugh, in which the others joined heartily.

Andy approached again, pulling the mower after him. "I'm done with the cutting, Jerry. I'll rake off this afternoon. I'm going to the store to get some tobacco. Do you or Peggy need anything?"

"You might get a dollar's worth of coffee," replied Mrs. Strong. "We do n't need anything else that I know of."

"Do you want anything, Hilda?" queried the man, with fire smoldering in his eyes. "I might run across a little nigger for you to adopt, you know. You'll soon be out of a job if yours is going to leave."

"I never asked you to pick an adoption for me yet, Andy."

"Lordy, no. If you had you would n't have started out with them Ritchie brats. Sammy was the bench leggedest youngster ever born, I reckon, and he's bench legged yet. The pair of them—him and Susy—beat all I ever set eyes on for ornery looks."

"Sakes alive, Andy, you've forgot how they've come out. They're both good looking in the main, and good, honest, hard-working people. I'm not ashamed of either of them. I take it a body's got to look higher than a man's legs to do him justice in this world. Sam's legs may be crooked, but his heart is straight and always was."

"It's a pity you was n't born a man, Hilda. You might have got to be President, or a preacher anyway."

"It takes more than gift of gab to measure up to what a President ought to be, if that's what you mean. I reckon I would have made a mess of things if such as that had come to pass."

"Well, you could n't have got things in a worse mess than old Abe Lincoln did when he turned the niggers loose. I'm expecting a nigger President next thing we know."

"I'm bound to say that no fellow ever was born that could have done better by the Union than Abraham Lincoln did in his day and time, no matter what comes to pass," asserted Jerry Payson, quietly.

"I reckon the Almighty made a blunder and put the wrong hides on you and old Abe and Hilda,

Jerry. 'The lot of you would have been full-blooded niggers if your skins had been black," retorted Andy, roughly.

"You 've no call to talk that way, Andy," replied Jerry Payson, sternly. "I 'm sorry we do n't look at things from the same point of view, but as long as we do n't, what 's the use to nag one another?"

"A man had n't ought to be damned for his honest opinions of things. But the world 's against me, no matter which way I blow my breath."

"There 's such a thing as a body's giving their opinions before they 're asked. A man can think what he likes and be peaceable about it. It 's bound to be pleasanter all round if a body keeps the peace."

"There 'll never be any more good times like we had before the war. Andy Peters must keep his mouth shut now, but the country 's free for the niggers to gad around in. O lordy, I reckon old Abe set things that have hatched out more than he expected."

"You 've run out of talk, Andy. It always sounds that way when a fellow says old times were better than we 've got right along. There 's always good times for a body that 's on the lookout for them. Why, it 's a fine thing to be living in this day and age. I would n't swap my time for any that 's past or any that 's to come when I 'm gone out of this mortal world. It 's a fact, Andy, Abraham Lincoln did set things that have hatched out better than he expected. Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!"

"But drat the niggers!" growled Andy, turning away.

IX.

A REVELATION.

ONE evening a few days after Miss Lane's consultation with Jerry Payson concerning Robert's letter and its import, Judge Horine remarked to his son :

"I received a letter from Robert Lane this morning. He said he had applied for the principalship of our schools, and asked for my influence. He intimated that you had written him of your intended resignation, and had advised him to apply for the vacancy."

"Yes, that is true. Of course I counted on your support, sir."

"Then you counted on the wrong man."

"What have you against Robert?" asked Eric, in surprise.

"A matter of principle only."

"Ah, I see—a sort of pun, is it?"

"Anything but a pun. It is a serious matter. I wish you had spoken to me before advising Robert."

"It can not be that you consider the mystery surrounding his birth a sufficient cause to debar him from the position?"

"No, not if his blood were not fatally tainted."

"What do you mean? Please explain. Robert has been my most intimate friend from earliest childhood."

"Yes, but I permitted it through ignorance of the truth until you were in your teens, and then I allowed it against my better judgment, believing that your intimacy would gradually cease as your professions occupied you more and more each year. It will be a shock to you, no doubt, to learn that Robert is an octoroon."

"Father!"

"It is the truth."

"Have you positive truth?" asked Eric, sickening with the remembrance of Robert's velvety dark eyes, olive skin, and wavy black hair.

"I would not make the assertion without sufficient proof. His mother is the handsome quadroon you once saw at Captain Berkley's at B——. She has been Mrs. Berkley's housekeeper for many years. I know nothing about Robert's father except that he was a white man—a Southerner."

"Who told you the story? Who identified Robert as the son of the quadroon?"

"The woman herself. She deserted her child at the door of the poorhouse, but soon regretting her act went back to recover him. Upon making cautious inquiries she found that Miss Lane, of Payson Bend, had already adopted him. She returned to B——, and entered the employment of the Berkleys, where she heard my name mentioned in connection with Payson Bend and wrote to me concerning

Miss Lane's character and immediate family. My reply was an eulogy on Miss Lane's high repute. I visited at Captain Berkley's several times during the next few years, and the woman always sought an opportunity to make inquiry about Miss Lane and her affairs. I finally exhibited some curiosity, but she excused her questions by saying that she had heard of the pathetic incident of Robert's desertion at the poorhouse door in his infancy, and was interested in his development under Miss Lane's care. Later I met the woman here in Payson Bend. She was walking along the street with Robert, whom she seemed to have approached as a stranger, seeking information of some kind. The boy was politely explaining something when I passed them, but as I met the woman's eyes she saw that I recognized her and was suspicious. I afterwards met her several times under similar circumstances at intervals of a year or so, and upon the occasion of my last visit at Captain Berkley's, when Robert was in his teens, she confessed the secret of her interest in him. I agreed to keep silent unless there arose a particular necessity for revealing the truth. The time has arrived."

"Does any one in Payson Bend know or suspect the truth?"

"I think not."

"Then why expose it?"

"I shall probably be compelled to do so at this crisis."

"Who will compel you?"

"The majority of the school board if they decide to employ Robert, as is sure to be the case when his application is considered. It is both fortunate and unfortunate that I am a member of the board. Several of the others are Robert's personal friends, and he is popular with all."

"And so if they attempt to hire him—"

"I shall fight the action and, if necessary, declare my objection. I shall never permit one of Negro blood to assume leadership or position of any kind within the limits of Payson Bend while I have power to prevent it. My father was one of the constructors of that prohibitory town ordinance. I have always indorsed it, and will never recede from my position. Is it possible that you would be less loyal, my son? Would you be willing to submit the children of Payson Bend to Negro rule?"

"Robert is not a Negro, sir!"

"You know the assertion, 'One drop of Negro blood makes a Negro.' I hold that true."

"I hold it odious, unjust, and untrue! And besides, Robert's case is peculiar and not to be compared with others. There is no prejudice in the minds of our people against him. You have said he is a favorite. He is worthy of the highest esteem, and is the truest-hearted fellow I ever knew. No one is likely to suspect the taint in his blood if you withhold your knowledge."

"Then would you have me permit an imposition, abet a degradation, countenance a curse, in our immediate community that is already gnawing at the

root of American strength and purity? Eric, are you a weakling and a renegade from the principles of your fathers?"

"The premises from which my grandfathers reasoned have practically lost their tenure. I am loyal to the Constitution of my country; true to the right and to my friend, Robert Lane. A principle, or rather an ordinance that has survived its own wisdom and virtue, is not a lofty ideal for me to advocate. It would be cowardice for me to pretend such allegiance in this instance. I would not indorse the indiscriminate employment of the descendants from Negroes for responsible positions in Payson Bend, nor would I invite the residence of any known person of such parentage to a town so antagonistic to the race. But in Robert's case there are circumstances that demand generous acknowledgment. His standing, morally and socially, is above reproach. He is the adopted son of a woman of unchallenged character and merit, and the best homes of our town have always been open to him. It would be a diabolical action to pronounce upon him a curse that must blight his prospects forever. Do n't do it, father."

"Eric, you are a man in years, but your sentiments and your reasoning would become a school-boy. You do not properly comprehend the magnitude and importance of the Negro problem. You are proposing to deal with Robert's case abstractly; but I tell you it is impossible to ignore its significance as a deadly infringement upon the welfare of

your townspeople, or to separate it from its vital connection with the race question."

"I confess that I do not believe that Robert's case is of any importance in the race problem so long as he himself and the public remain ignorant of the taint in his blood. This truly appears to be an instance of 'Where ignorance is bliss, 't is folly to be wise.' It will be exaggerating a point of small moment into an immeasurable wrong to proclaim a fact that should remain secret for reasons of friendship and kindness, if nothing else, since no one will be materially wronged by the omission, and much suffering will be thus averted. To all intents and purposes Robert Lane is a white man, and will remain as such if you withhold your knowledge."

"I have kept my lips sealed too long. My sin is recoiling upon me in your words, my son. I should have revealed the truth to you in your more impressionable years. Your conception of my duty to the public in general, and to my associates in particular, is very narrow. Do you realize that as matters now rest Robert is free and liable to marry a white girl of unquestioned parentage? Would you, with your present knowledge, allow him to proceed in such action without scruple or hindrance? Would you stand by with sealed lips while an unsuspecting young lady of your acquaintance entered into wedlock with him, ignorant of the curse that might sooner or later confront her with the horrible truth in the features of her offspring? If you will evade

the Negro in Robert in all other respects, you must recognize it in this possible phase."

Eric rose from his chair and paced the floor. He was now reminded of Robert's last letter, which contained the confidence of his recent betrothal to Flossie Bruce, the daughter of Colonel Bruce, and one of Payson Bend's most charming and lovable girls. Here indeed was an appalling complication. After some meditation, he said:

"I feel the weight of your last argument, father, and admit the wisdom of informing Robert of the truth; but the public need not know it. Robert has rigid ideas of honor, and will govern the affairs of his life by the knowledge he receives. You can trust him to act nobly; he is incapable of any other course."

"I have compromised with silence too long it seems, since my son has come to find deceit more commendable than honesty and more admirable than justice. I regret that I have lived to discover in my only child a traitor to the principles I have sought to sustain."

"And I regret our differences, sir, though I do not believe I am lacking so much in the virtues you disclaim for me. However, there need be no serious embarrassment for you. I will write to Robert and ask him to withdraw his application for reasons that will be made known to him later. He will trust the sincerity of my friendship until you can impart your information to him in person."

"Too late; the question shall come before the

board. I shall sound their principles and determine whether I stand alone as the defender of our town from a fatal compromise with a deadly evil. Yes, it shall come to an issue."

"But, father, if Robert will withdraw his application there need be no issue. I will write to him immediately."

"Too late; the board will meet in half an hour."

"Father, remember that Robert is an innocent victim. Spare him! You can advise a delay in the hiring of teachers. Such delays have frequently occurred in the past."

"Perhaps; but I shall test the strength of my position. The question shall come to an issue. It is high time when my own flesh and blood turns against me!" declared the Judge wrathfully, as he left the room and house and stalked down the street with determination in every muscle of his body.

Mrs. Horine had listened to the conversation without comment, having learned the value of holding her peace long years before. In the foregoing controversy, however, her sympathy had gone out to Eric, but her convictions coincided with those of the judge. She was a Southerner by birth, and cherished bitter memories of the disaster that had befallen her family through the abolishment of slavery. She regarded Negroes as the natural servants of the superior race, and nothing more or less than intelligent beasts of burden.

"Can't you help me, mother?" asked Eric, turning his miserable face toward the silent woman.

"What can I do to avert the calamity father is determined to bring upon Robert?"

"I don't know, Eric, unless a telegram could reach him in time for him to dispatch the withdrawal of his application. The board will dispose of other matters before they consider the applications, I imagine."

"Good, mother! I'll send a telegram!" exclaimed the young man, snatching his hat and rushing away. He passed his father on the street with a cheerful word, and hastened on. But the judge was a shrewd man, and suspicioned his son's errand even before noting the direction taken by him.

Judge Horine's hatred for Negroes was the outgrowth of family prejudice. One of his ancestors had been one of the few Illinois slaveholders, but was a man of chaste virtue himself, and regarded the amalgamation of the white and black races a crime against man and God. Nevertheless he had been a severe taskmaster over those he held in bondage, and paid the penalty of supporting the vile system of slavery in crime and death. His youngest daughter, the darling of his heart, eloped with a handsome young mulatto, and the enraged father, overtaking the pair crossing the Mississippi in a boat, shot them both and sunk their bodies in the turbid river. He then returned home, confided his crime to his eldest son, made his will, and put a bullet through his own brain. It was generally believed that he came to his death through the accidental discharge of a gun in his own hands; but the fate of his daughter and

the dusky companion of her flight was never revealed save to the male members of the family and their descendants. As directed by his will the family sold off their slaves at once, and never trafficked with Negroes again nor permitted favorable sentiments toward them to be instilled into the minds of their children.

Eric Horine sent a brief message to Robert Lane, and remained at the telegraph office till midnight to receive a reply, but none came. He returned home disheartened. The judge had retired, but Mrs. Horine was sitting on the porch awaiting her son.

"Your father came home in a temper," she volunteered after Eric had told of his disappointment. "I asked if the board had their meeting, and he answered me very harshly, 'It met madame, and the tiger is loose!' he said."

"Then it is all up with Robert's peace of mind, I suppose. He must have been out of Kingly, or he would have responded to my message."

"Well, I would n't worry, Eric. You have done all you could."

"I know, but you see it was at my suggestion that Robert sent in his application. I wish father were less rabid. Did n't he say anything more about the meeting?"

"Not a word. He went into the house and slammed every door he passed through, and finally went up to bed. I have been thinking of Hilda Lane, Eric. What a blow this will be to her. Her highest hopes are centered in Robert."

"Yes, I know, mother," replied Eric, with a groan. "If I could only do something. It is distressing to be so helpless in a matter so vital to the happiness and welfare of one's best friends."

Judge Horine was morose at the breakfast table next morning, and not until he had deliberately disposed of two cups of coffee and six well-buttered corn cakes did he mention the board meeting. Then, with a keen glance at Eric, he announced:

"We had five applications for the principalship last night."

"Pretty fair competition. Did you hire?"

"No. The vote for Robert was unanimous."

"I expected as much."

"So did I; but I put a damper on the action, and a second vote was a tie. Berry was away and lost his vote."

"Yes, sir. What was the upshot?" asked Eric, trying to conceal his impatience.

"An order for the printer to issue and distribute handbills all over Payson Bend to-day, calling a meeting of the citizens at the town hall Monday night to debate the question of Negro invasion into our midst. This is Saturday; the thing will be in fine ferment by Monday night."

"No doubt. You are my father, sir; it would not be prudent for me to express myself concerning the uncalled for publicity you have made of a delicate matter," remarked Eric, rising abruptly from the table and going out of doors to pace up and down the path, disturbed and angry. He felt that it was

his duty to apprise Miss Lane of the state of affairs, and not leave her to meet the shock of a chance discovery. The town would soon be in a hubbub. He decided to go at once and make a full confession of his own part in the unhappy result of Robert's application for the highest position in the Payson Bend schools.

X.

A SHADOWED DAY.

MISS LANE was not at home when Eric knocked on the cottage door, but Liberty said she was expecting her every moment. She had spent the night at her farmhouse caring for Mrs. Ritchie, who was ill.

"Did you want anything in particular, Eric?" asked the girl.

"Very particular. I will call again as soon as Miss Lane returns," replied the young man, turning away. He had noticed Victory gathering roses in the Payson yard, and crossed the road to have a chat with her. Seeing him approach the gate the girl called out gayly:

"What news this morning, Eric? Who is to be my superior in your place next year?"

"How do you know you have n't been left off the list, Missy?"

"O, I'm not afraid of that. You see I stand in with the board pretty well."

"Is there any one you do n't stand in with pretty well?" asked Eric, with his admiring eyes fixed on the bright face of the girl.

"I do n't really know. But, seriously now, did the board give Robert the principalship?"

The shadow in Eric's eyes deepened. "Let us sit on one of these benches, Victory. I have something to tell you about Robert."

"O Eric!" said Victory when the story was finished, "how my heart aches for Aunt Hilda as well as for Robert!"

"Yes, it will be a cruel blow. I am angry with father for launching the affair upon the public. It was not necessary."

"But I think your father's action was right, whatever the spirit of it."

"Right? Surely you do n't mean that, Victory."

"Yes, I do. Robert should know the truth, and so should the public. He should be prohibited from the position he seeks. Any degree of Negro rule is abhorrent to contemplate. I esteem Robert, and deplore this discovery, but much as my sympathy is involved, my reason upholds the principle at stake in your father's action. Your own views must have changed in the last few years if you now countenance the idea of a Negro ruler over the children of our town. Suppose, in conformity with our present school discipline, an incorrigible was obliged to choose between corporal punishment and expulsion. To submit to either condition at the instance of one of the inferior race would be intolerable. The youth of our schools would rise in open rebellion, and with just cause. A public benefit can not be placed under the control of a Negro with justice."

"Robert is not a Negro. He is more white than black."

"'The fatal drop' is there."

"And do you believe that a worthy man should be condemned to misery because of a drop of blood in his veins that it would take a hound of injustice to scent?"

"No. But he should be taught to see the fitness of things. Of course Robert has been innocent of his defect, but now he must face the future from a new standpoint. You would not wish your father to assist in a deception at the expense of a just protective measure, would you?"

"I would have him avoid needless cruelty, since it would harm no one, but would promote the happiness of many. I admit only one necessity for revelation, and that to Robert alone. What is my friendship worth if it wavers and withdraws support because of a chance discovery that does not in the least affect the nobility of my friend's character? I am disappointed, Victory. I did not expect you to fail Robert at such a time."

"Of what value is principle if one does n't stand by it? Principle comes before friendship. Principle to the death of all else is my standard!" declared Victory in cool, firm tones that were in direct contrast to the man's fervency of voice and manner.

Eric gazed at the girl, amazed at the austerity he had never recognized in her before. As if she were unfamiliar in this new attitude his glance lifted to the blossom trembling in her crown of blue-black hair, and swept slowly downwards over her broad white forehead, straight nose, delicately chiseled lips,

full chin, and creamy throat. Finally he fell to watching how boldly the sunshine danced over her sprigged muslin frock and drank the dewdrops from the petals of the sheaf of roses on her lap. Slightly embarrassed under her lover's gaze, Victory fingered the rose-leaves restlessly, her betrothal ring glittering at every move.

"How very dismal we are this morning, Eric!" said the girl with a smile, when the silence grew oppressive. "I hope you don't think me altogether harsh and cold. A penny for your thoughts!"

"I was wondering what you would have done if it had been me instead of Robert in whom this flaw had been revealed. Would you have broken your vows to me, and ceased to love me? Would you, Victory, dearest?"

"Marriage would have been out of the question, of course; but nothing could destroy my affection for you, Eric."

"Nothing?"

"I can not think of anything now."

"But something might occur—a condition, a revelation apart from hereditary taint that would involve a principle which you could sustain only by parting with me."

"I could give you up for the sake of sustaining a mighty principle, Eric, even though my love for you endured to the end of my life," replied the girl, steadily.

"Victory," exclaimed the man, passionately, "look into my eyes and listen to what I say! There is noth-

ing in the world that I would allow to part us. I would stand by you through any disaster of fate, or sin, or blight of body or prospect, so long as you loved me and was true to me! Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think so," answered the girl, calmly. "But why do we speak of improbabilities? There is nothing between you and me."

"No. Forgive me, I am overwrought. It must be Robert's trouble weighing upon me. It is odd, but for the moment I felt the clutch of a demon at my heart. I am chilled as if some unhappy doom were hovering over me."

"How foolish! You are indeed overwrought. Cheer up! the sunny way is ours."

"So it seemed to Robert and Flossie. Poor little Flossie Bruce! How will she meet this shock? I can not believe she will fail Robert."

"She will have to give him up. It will almost crush her, but her parents will never consent to the marriage now."

"But she loves Robert almost to idolatry, and it is her nature to be loyal. Remember how she has always stood by Liberty."

"Yes, I know how steadfast she is, but she could not forsake her parents, as she would have to do to marry Robert now. But see, there is Aunt Hilda getting out of her buggy. Why not ask her to come over here, so you can tell her and Uncle Jerry the news at the same time. They will want to talk it over together anyway. We are like one family, you know."

"I am willing," replied Eric.

"O, Aunt Hilda!" called Victory, without further parley. "Come over, won't you? Eric has something to tell you and Uncle Jerry."

"All right!" responded Miss Lane, blithely. "I'll be over as soon as I have a word with Liberty."

By the time Victory had wheeled Jerry Payson out on the veranda Miss Lane was half way up the drive, her face glowing with expectancy.

"I reckon Robert's got the school, has n't he, Eric?" she asked, joyously.

"You've got a hefty opinion of Robert, have n't you, Hilda?" interposed Jerry Payson, teasingly, himself full of pleasant anticipation of the same news.

"I should n't wonder if I had," replied the woman, nodding at Andy Peters, who shuffled around the house and sat down on the edge of the veranda. He usually managed to be present whenever she came over.

"Better take that rocking-chair beside Hilda, Andy," suggested Jerry Payson, jovially. "She won't bite if you behave yourself. Victory, suppose you call your grandmother as long as we're having a general muster."

"I'm sitting right inside the window, Jerry," said Mrs. Strong. "My sewing is here, and I can listen plenty good."

Eric Horine glanced from one expectant face to another with increasing gravity in his own. Victory busied herself with a bit of Battenburg lace. Andy

sat, with bowed head and alert ears, packing the bowl of his pipe with tobacco. Hilda Lane was rocking and exchanging smiles with Jerry Payson. The birds were singing their gayest in the trees all about, and a company of bees were humming happily as they drew the nectar from the roses at the end of the veranda and the syringa beyond.

"We're all waiting for the spirit to move you, Eric," said Jerry Payson, wondering at the young man's hesitancy.

"Maybe it is n't about Robert, after all. Is it, Eric?" asked Miss Lane, the eagerness dying out of her eyes.

"Yes, it is about Robert," replied Eric, leaving his chair to pace back and forth in front of the veranda. "It is about Robert, but it is n't pleasant news, and I hardly know how to begin."

"Well, do n't be afraid to tell it, Eric. I reckon the board did n't give him the school, or else—sakes alive, Eric, he is n't sick or hurt in a train wreck, is he?" demanded the woman, with fading color.

"No, he is well so far as I know, and the principal has n't been chosen yet. There was a tie."

"O, is that all? I was scared for a minute. If Robert is well, the rest do n't matter much. I got a letter from him yesterday, and he said he had an offer from another place at better wages than they pay here, and the Kingly board want him back again, too. So it is n't any killing matter if he do n't get this school, but I did n't think but what he'd get a

full vote here. What have any of the board got against him?"

"I'll have to begin at the first of my story, Miss Lane. Did you ever discover Robert's parentage?"

"No. Has anybody?" asked the woman, quickly.

"Yes."

"Well, do n't beat about the bush, Eric. Tell what you know. I always had it in my mind that Robert did n't come from common stock. Who are his folks, and where are they?"

When once started Eric soon reached the end of his story. Miss Lane did not speak during the recital, but her face took on an ashen hue, and intense suffering darkened her eyes as the truth developed. The silence following the tale was broken by Mrs. Strong, who suddenly gave way to moans and sobs and rocked herself back and forth desolately.

"Why, what's come to you, Peggy?" asked Jerry Payson, alarmed at a display of emotion so unusual in his sister.

"La me, Jerry, it's the awful troubles that're always coming to folks in this world!" cried the woman, leaving her chair by the window and going upstairs to her own room.

"It is n't natural for Peggy to take things so hard," remarked Jerry Payson, uneasily. "I'm afraid she is feeling worse than common this morning."

"Peggy takes spells without much reason some-

times," commented Andy; "but I suppose she's touched now at the judgment that's come on Hilda for acting so high and mighty about keeping Liberty in spite of Payson Bend folks. It's their turn to get even with her now."

"That'll do now, Andy!" said Jerry Payson, sternly.

"Maybe it'll do for you, but I'm not done yet. I reckon Timothy Lane would get right up out of his grave and stomp round here like the old Harry if he knew a nigger was going by the name of Lane the same as if he belonged to the family."

"You'd best shut up now, Andy. Hilda's got enough to bear up under, without you nagging at her," said Jerry Payson, more gently than he had spoken before. He was watching the stricken woman, longing to comfort her.

"Do n't worry about me, Jerry," said Miss Lane, quietly. "If it does Andy any good to spurt off, why let him. It do n't pester me any more than the crowing of that bantam rooster over yonder just now. I've got bigger things than his rattle on my mind. It is n't me that's got the heft of this trouble to bear—it's Robert. I love him just the same as ever, and I take it he's a credit to the name of Lane; but there's heaps of narrow-minded folks that'll stand ready to fling his bit of Negro blood in his face at every turn to hinder him from what he set out to be."

"It is n't the narrow-minded folks that're going to count in the long run, Hilda. Robert will come

out ahead of the mob yet!" declared Jerry Payson, encouragingly.

"I've noticed that narrow-minded folks bob round and take up more room than broad-minded ones, Jerry, and they've got tongues that run faster, too. Big things are n't so frisky and tormenting as little ones, I take it. But sakes alive, what am I grumbling for? God's got the swing of this mess, and He'll fetch things out the best way without any of my meddling. And in spite of my feeling for Robert, I do n't know as I'd feel free to take this cup of sorrow out of his hands if I could. Maybe it's full of some sort of bitters that'll turn to sweetness by and by when he gets past the first bad taste. He won't sit down and whine. He'll show the stuff he's made of; but if I could sort of mother him through the worst hurt of it, like I did his troubles when he was little, I'd feel calmer."

"I'll stand by him," said Eric Horine, sympathetically.

"And me too, Hilda. You know that," affirmed Jerry Payson.

"You need n't look to me to stand by your niggers, Hilda. It's against my nature," observed Andy, spitefully.

"Do n't you worry, Andy. I'm not likely to look to the wrong folks. But you need n't call Robert a nigger. There's nothing black or mean about him. A real nigger is a slave of some sort, but it do n't mean a black-skinned man any more than a white man."

"I reckon the Constitution of our country means black niggers when it talks about slaves!"

"There's no such words as slave and nigger in the whole Constitution. You'd best study up a bit, Andy. A slave is a body that's in bondage of some sort. The Negroes were slaves before they were set free, and there's slaves to drink and other sorts of meanness, and kinds of slaves chained heart and soul to the shadows that have grown round their minds like prison walls too thick to let the sun get through. Maybe you know one of the last sort, Andy." Miss Lane had spoken sadly, and Andy replied gloomily:

"If I do, Hilda, it's because the world has always been against me."

"You've been against the world and yourself in the bargain, Andy. You've kept your mind fixed on Andy Peters and the Negro that stole your hair watchchain till you can't see anything else in the whole world. I take it the thoughts that get before the windows of a body's mind are the biggest things in sight."

"That's a fine point, Miss Lane—a fine point!" asserted Eric Horine, thoughtfully.

"That it is," agreed Jerry Payson, catching up a fold of his flag and drawing it across his maimed body. "This is the biggest thing in my sight, I reckon. Hooray for the Stars and Stripes!"

"You forgot old Abe, Jerry," commented Andy, grimly. "But drat the niggers all the same!"

"No, I did n't forget him, Andy. He's joined to

the flag of the Union forever. I could n't forget him—I've had him in mind most of my life. Leastways, I was n't but a stripling of nineteen when I went across the country in a wagon with father and Timothy Lane and old Jim Watson to hear Abraham Lincoln's big speech at Springfield in June of '58, and he's been the biggest man before my mind ever since. All the way home father and the others argued about the main points of the speech. Old Jim Watson could n't get beyond the first point, where Abraham said that he did n't believe the Government could stay half slave and half free. Jim said Abe did n't know much, because any fool could see that half and half was the only fair way of running things, and it was n't reasonable for one half to try to make the other half knuckle down to their way of doing. But father stuck up for Abraham's way of thinking, and said Jim would live to see the whole country free or slave. Jim did live to see it free, but he died kicking about it. He said the country would have a big bust up some fine day to pay for setting the niggers free, and then there'd be kingdom come with a nigger king riding in a gold chariot drawn by white men, and all such stuff as that. But every word of that Springfield speech was great to me, and when Abraham Lincoln was put up for President the year I came of age, he got my first vote. I mind yet how I yelled and yelled, and could n't get done when the news came that he'd come out ahead. Hooray for Abraham Lincoln!"

"You forgot the Stars and Stripes this time, Jerry," said Andy, ironically. "But drat the niggers anyhow!"

"Well, I must be getting home," said Miss Lane, rising. "I told Liberty I'd be back as soon as I heard the news about Robert. It was n't the sort I expected; but I'm glad you told me, such as it is, Eric. I'm looking for Robert to come home every train now. His school let out a few days ago, but he 'lowed to stop at St. Louis to see Flossie. She's there on a visit, you know."

"Is there anything I can do for you, Aunt Hilda?" asked Victory, as the woman started down the driveway looking worn and weary.

"No, not for me, pettie. But I'll be obliged if you'll stand by Robert and help to cheer him up, so he won't feel like his best friends have turned against him. That's all you can do for me."

Victory bent over her work in silence, and only Eric, who was watching her closely, noted the quiver of her scarlet lips.

In a short time the veranda was deserted of all but Jerry Payson, who sat with closed eyes singing 'Just Before the Battle' very softly, and Andy Peters, who was huddled on the end of the veranda, smoking and scowling.

In the meantime the atmosphere of Payson Bend was beginning to thrill with excitement. All along Stage Street people were gathered in groups reading

and discussing the scare-head handbills that had been scattered broadcast through the town:

“SCHOOL BOARD TIES!

“SHALL PAYSON BEND EMPLOY A NEGRO
PRINCIPAL?

“Let every citizen of Payson Bend attend the call meeting at the town hall, Monday night, June 2d, to consider this important question!”

XI.

AN EPISODE.

THE next day was Sabbath, but that did not prevent the people of Payson Bend from thinking of secular affairs. The members of the school board had agreed among themselves to withhold the name of the unfortunate applicant until Monday night, and believed that only themselves, the Horines, Paysons, and Miss Lane were aware of the truth.

The mystery did not lessen public interest, however, and although the churches were well filled at morning services, it is doubtful whether the several congregations received as much spiritual benefit from the messages given by their pastors as usual.

Miss Lane was present at her place of worship, and Liberty, too, occupied the chair in the rear of the auditorium reserved for her use. This privilege had been secured for her with great difficulty by a pastor long since removed from the town, and never under any circumstances had the girl been permitted to sit in a pew. Jerry Payson and Victory Radcliffe were at Church also; but Andy Peters, after wheeling his charge to his favorite place in the aisle, had returned home to sit out the hour of service on the pleasant veranda, smoking and brooding.

As before described, the first house east of the Payson place was the home of Miss Betty Bigelow, a spinster well along in years, who, since the death of her aged mother had lived in solitary state. She spent most of her time in making patchwork quilts, and was still a candidate for matrimony. She had shown Andy Peters marked attention for years, but seemed to make no progress in his affections. True, he ate the choice fruits which she handed over the fence to him as he passed, and reluctantly accepted the bouquets she pressed upon him with the expressed hope that he would carry them to his room and remember the giver; but these he invariably tossed on the refuse pile in the barnyard with a muttered "Plague on Betty Bigelow, anyhow!"

On the Sabbath morning in review Andy was particularly irritable. Eric Horine's revelation and the conversation following it had stirred up old grievances, and he had passed a restless night. Furthermore, Nabob, the newly-broken colt which Jerry Payson had purchased for a carriage horse, had broken his halter at daybreak and, escaping from the stable, had nearly ruined the kitchen garden of finely growing vegetables. The violent exercise necessary to capture the unruly animal had been a severe tax upon Andy, and nervous and angry he had responded to the breakfast call only accidentally to knock over the cream pitcher, and in a futile attempt to right it swept his coffee cup from the table, breaking the china and scalding his rheumatic knee with the hot liquid. Later he had cut his chin while

shaving, and so finally got into his Sunday clothes in anything but a Sunday mood.

After these trying experiences it may be imagined that the time was not favorable for further annoyance; but Miss Betty Bigelow was not aware of it. Quite innocent of wrong-doing, she ran across the side street, calling loudly:

"O, Mr. Peters! Andy!"

"Lordy, I'm not deaf! What do you want?" he growled.

"Why, I want you to come over to my house and see what's in my cellar. I'm nearly scared out of my wits!"

"I didn't know you had any. In your cellar?"

"Yes. It sounded like a pistol went off first, and then a shotgun. I'm afraid a man or a varmint is trying to blow the house up. That's what comes of a woman living all soul alone. There, I heard it again! I wish you'd hurry."

"Well, if you think it's a man you'd best run and lock the cellar door so he can't get away; you've been trying to get one long enough," muttered Andy, getting up slowly and moving in the direction of Miss Betty's house as deliberately as possible.

"There's the door that goes down into the cellar, and here's the broom and a poker, Andy," whispered the woman, indicating a door opening from the pantry.

Andy opened the door and looked down a narrow flight of stairs. "I don't hear anything," he said, after listening a moment. "I reckon it's nothing

more than a snake that 's crawled through the hole in the screen of the cellar window. I saw a hole as I came past."

"A snake? Why, you 'll scare me into fits, Andy! I 'm worse afraid of snakes than men."

"Should n't wonder; but you 're getting old enough to have a mite of sense. Give me that poker. I reckon I 've got to go down, in spite of my lame knee."

The cellar was well lighted. Neither "man nor varmint" was visible; but a vile odor filled the air.

"Well, I 'll be sizzled!" exclaimed Andy, disgustedly, when he had looked about. "Say, Betty, what sort of stuff have you got in these tin cans?"

"What tin cans?" inquired Betty from the head of the stairs.

"Why, these on the table in the middle of the cellar!"

"O, let me see! I guess they 're peas. Yes, I know they are!"

"Well, the pesky things have spoilt. Four cans have busted open, and there 's peas stuck all over the joists and planks over head, and everywhere else. It smells worse than rotten eggs down here. You 'd best open up the outside door and let the smell out."

"Land o' mercy, after all the trouble I had shell-ing them peas!"

"Well, I 'm not going to stand here in this mess! Open the outside door and I 'll take these other two

cans out in the yard before they bust, too. They're sizzling mightily now."

But when Miss Betty was opening the outside door she heard two loud reports and immediately encountered a spectacle of fury that almost took her breath. Andy had evidently started with the two cans, but his first movements had precipitated the explosion of both, and his face, hat, and Sunday clothes had received the full charge of fermenting peas. Stifled with the sickening odor, Miss Betty gave one wild glance at the furious man whose face was dripping with vile liquid and from whose hair, eyebrows, and beard numerous flattened peas were dropping, and fled from the scene. She heard Andy's curses following her as she dashed across the street and into Miss Lane's gate, and, running on, cast herself down on the back porch of the cottage in a panic of fear. Miss Lane and Liberty discovered her when they returned from Church.

"Sakes alive, Betty! What is the matter? You're as white as chalk!" exclaimed Miss Lane.

"It's them peas, Hilda! They've busted and about killed Andy Peters! My, O my! I've got more trouble than I can live through!" wailed the woman, distractedly.

Convulsed with laughter, Liberty hurried up stairs to change her dress; but Miss Lane quietly took off her bonnet and gloves, and then drew Miss Betty into the sitting-room.

"There now, Betty," she said, gently, "you sit in the rocking-chair till you get calmed down. I reckon

Andy was n't hurt much. Liberty and me have got a cold roasted chicken and a cherry pie for dinner. I'll start the fire to boil water for coffee now. I want you to stay and eat with us. We heard a fine sermon this morning. I'll be proud when Robert—"

Miss Lane paused suddenly at the remembrance of Eric's story, but Miss Betty was too much engrossed with her own troubles to notice the broken sentence. Unpleasant subjects were ignored until dinner was over. Then Miss Betty declared:

"I can't rest another minute, Hilda. I'll have to go home and see to things, but I want you to go with me. I'm afraid Andy's hid in the cellar or under the bed to scare me. I do n't suppose I'll sleep a wink to-night."

"I'll go with you, Betty; but you need n't be afraid of Andy. You might as well tell me all about what happened now. I did n't get the gist of the story, you know. You was n't fit to tell it when I came home and found you here."

Miss Betty related the facts of the occurrence solemnly, and then began to weep.

"I would n't take on so, Betty. I can judge how you feel about Andy's clothes getting messed up and his feelings riled; but it is n't any killing matter. He'll get over it."

"But he'll never forgive me, and I've always thought a heap of Andy. There's other things bearing down on me, too. I had an awful disappointment yesterday. You know I've had hopes lately of getting a chance to use the forty quilts I've got

pieced and quilted, and the piles of sheets and pillow-cases and towels and the like that I've made and laid by for my wedding dower. I told you about Lem Hall coming to see me three Sundays hand running, did n't I? Well, he came again yesterday and asked me square out to marry him. I was struck all of a heap."

"Why, I thought you were sort of looking for it, by the way you talked the other day, Betty."

"I was, but not the way it came. It was n't what I was looking for. I told him I did n't want a husband bad enough to take him, and he up and dusted out of the house as mad as a hornet."

"Sakes alive, Betty, you talked like you'd be glad to get him last week. What's wrong now?"

"Well, Lem's lived to get cold-hearted. He was sitting in a chair across the room from me when he asked me to have him. He said: 'Well, Betty, I'm on the hunt of a wife, and I suppose you're on the lookout for a husband. Suppose we get married. I've got two good farms, and my children are all married but two, and they're spoken for. I'm getting seventy-five yards of nice rag carpet woven, and I'm willing to buy a new-fangled range for the kitchen, and a few odds and ends of furniture where it's needed to slick up the house. What do you say? Shall we give the preacher a job soon?' Think of that, Hilda. A man asking a woman to marry him as calm and business-like as if he was making a bargain for a farm or a cow. Not a word of love

nor a move to get hold of my hand nor anything. I never thought things would be that way."

"I reckon Lem meant well, Betty. Maybe he thought you'd got past the time for love-making. I'm reasonably sure he did 'nt mean any harm."

"No; but it riled me to have him act so cold. His first wife, Sally Granger, told me that Lem was n't content to sit still when he was courting her unless he could hold her hand and tell her how much he loved her about every five minutes. And after Sally died he courted Hester Cook the same way. Hester told me herself that she would n't have married him so quick after Sally died if he had n't acted so love-sick she had to marry him to get shut of his love-making. I'm just as good as Sally or Hester either one. It's love I hanker for, and if I can't get that along with a husband I'll stay single the rest of my days. Lem's had his share of love-making, maybe, but I have n't. And it is n't as if he did n't know how, or was backward. I mind what Sally and Hester both told me to this day."

"Well, maybe Lem wanted to wait till he was sure of you before he acted too loving. I believe he meant well; but you are n't bad off as you are, Betty. You're plenty able to take a little orphan baby to raise, and you'd get love that way. It's mighty pleasant to mother a little helpless thing that looks to you for all it needs in this world for a few years."

"I don't know, Hilda. It would scare me to

have a baby on my hands to do for, and it might stand in the way of my chances to marry. I've got so many things made and laid by, you know. I'd hate to spoil my chances."

"Well, I take it a body ought to be content with the sort of love that's to be got for the asking, if the other sort can't be had. A body forgets their disappointments and sorrows when they set themselves to making happiness for the helpless. And I take it there's more pleasure in doing things in season—making things that are needed as the days go by—than in making things to pile up for a time that may never come to pass. A body gets starved down to misery when they sit waiting for particular things to come to them. Time moves along slicker when a body is getting pay for the work of their hands as they go along. I've had full pay and more watching my adoptions grow up comfortable and happy because of what I was doing for them. You'd find it pleasant to mother a baby, Betty, and feel its heft against your bosom and its little hands in the jam of your neck. And just to see it smile back when you smile, or look frightened when you scowl—sakes alive, it comes home to a body then that the milk of human kindness was n't put in a body's bosom to dry up."

"I'd be 'most afraid to try it, Hilda; but I'll think about it. I guess I'll have to go home now. I'm uneasy about things. My, but Andy was the worst sight I ever laid eyes on, with them peas splattered all over him."

The two women went over to Miss Betty's house, but failed to find any sign of Andy Peters. After chatting awhile Miss Lane was starting home when Jerry Payson, who was sitting on his veranda, called to her :

"Come over a bit, won't you, Hilda?"

Miss Lane complied with the request reluctantly. She was mind-weary, and had thought to have a quiet hour with Liberty; furthermore she did not care to encounter Andy in the mood she feared he was in; but he was not visible. And besides all else it was never easy for Hilda Lane to refuse a request made by Jerry Payson.

"I reckon you did n't feel like coming, Hilda," said the man, having noticed her hesitancy. "You do need rest, I know. You've been sitting up with Sam's wife too much, and now this worry about Robert is weighing down on you. You'll be down sick yourself next thing."

"I'm not like to overdo myself, Jerry. Where are all the folks? Peggy did n't get out to Church, I noticed."

"No, Peggy is n't very chipper to-day. She's upstairs lying down now. Victory's out riding with Eric, and Ellen went to see her sister. I have n't seen Andy since he wheeled me down to Church. He did n't come back to get me, but Eric wheeled me home. I reckon Andy's round the place; but I'm a mite uneasy. Ellen says he's been acting mighty strange. She saw him sitting on the veranda after he got back from the church smoking as calm

as a summer day, and the next thing she saw of him he was running to the stable lickity split and swearing like all possessed. She thought Nabob had got out again, but he had n't, and directly Andy came out of the stable in the old blue jumper and overalls he keeps out there to do the chores in. Ellen called him to dinner and so did Peggy ; but he did n't come, and I told them not to pester him any more, or it might rile him if he was n't feeling well. He had to run after Nabob till he was worn out this morning, and I reckon it set his knee to hurting."

The words were barely out of Jerry Payson's mouth when Andy, true to his habit, appeared around the corner of the house and took up his favorite position on the end of the veranda.

"Sakes alive, Andy, Jerry was just fretting about you!" exclaimed Miss Lane. "Maybe you went off to sleep and forgot yourself. I did the same thing Friday. I was sitting in the rocking-chair sewing on a shirt for one of Sam's boys and dropped off. I did n't wake up for an hour, and my neck was nearly broken from the way my head had bobbed round."

"I have n't been sleeping!" snapped Andy.

"You're sick, are n't you, Andy?" asked Jerry Payson, anxiously. "You missed a fine dinner, too. I had Ellen to set up your choice piece of the chicken and a dish of those marrowfat peas. I thought you might get to feeling better and want a snack before supper time."

"What're you flinging them pesky peas at me for?" demanded Andy, angrily.

"Why, I only meant you to have your share," replied Jerry, bewildered at the accusation. "You said they were the finest we ever raised when you brought them in from the garden yesterday. Is it your stomach or your knee that's pestering you?"

"My knee's a steady pesteration, but now—O lordy, my stomach's upset for the balance of my days, I reckon! Do n't you ever mention peas to me again. I've got enough to do me till I'm laid on Crown Hill."

"You got overheated, Andy, and it's gone to your stomach. I guess I'll have Dr. Hilton come to see you, and Peggy, too. She has n't been herself since Lina died two years ago; but she's drooped worse than ever here lately."

"When I want a doctor I'll let you know," asserted Andy, harshly. "You look after Peggy and let me alone."

"It is n't medicine I'm needing, Jerry," said Mrs. Strong, coming out of the house, hollow-eyed and wan. "It's the worry that killed poor Lina by inches that's bearing down on me now. I can't stand the heft of it alone any longer. I might have held out a while longer if it had n't been for what's come out about Robert; but now I've come down to make a clean breast of it, so you and me and Victory can keep Hilda and Robert company in their trouble. La, me, there's trouble at every turn in this world."

"I can swear to that, Peggy," announced Andy, dolefully. "I've had nothing but trouble ever since the day I was born."

"You 'll find out that your troubles are n't any bigger than a flea on a dog's back, Andy, if you 'll listen to what I've got to tell. It's what Robert's got to bear, and what's got to fall on Victory now, that cuts into the heart."

"There, there, Peggy, do n't take on so," said Jerry Payson, kindly. "I'll bear things with you, whatever comes."

"I know, Jerry; but you have n't any sort of notion what's coming, and the worst of it is that you and me together can't take the brunt of it off of Victory's shoulders. I'll tell it now before she gets home, and then she 'll have to hear it."

With this preface Mrs. Strong sobbed out her pitiful story.

XII.

PEGGY STRONG'S STORY.

"You all mind the night Rhody Despard brought Lina home? Well, then you have n't forgot what Lina told the next day about Jim Despard getting hung because folks believed he did an awful thing in the neighborhood where he lived, and how Jason Radcliffe tried to save him from the mob, and got a load of shot in his back and his house burnt over his head to pay for it. I do n't know as I blame Jason for trying to help Jim—Lina said the nigger was raised close to the Radcliffe plantation, and would have fought and died for Jason just the same—but I do think Jason went too far when he hid Jim in his own garret and riled the mob up to set fire to the house and scare Lina half to death, besides getting himself shot up so bad he died.

"I do n't know what they would have done if it had n't been for Rhody Despard. She said Jason had stood by Jim to the death, and she was n't the one to forsake such a friend as that. She took Lina and Jason to her cabin, and did the best she could by them, and when Jason was dying promised to bring Lina up North as soon as she could. Well, Jason was n't much more than in the ground till

Lina took down with the fever, and Rhody kept her in the cabin and did for her, besides taking in washing for a living and to get money to fetch Lina home.

"Jason was only a clerk, and all they had was the house and things that got burnt, so Lina had to sell her watch and rings to pay for Jason's coffin and burying. She was too proud to write to me for help, because she'd been so high-headed and married against my will. Jason said his folks were mad, too, because he had married a Northern girl, and he would never go to see them till his mother got over her mad spell.

"Well, after Jason was dead and Lina next thing to it, she picked up spunk and wrote to Rupert Radcliffe, and told him what had come to his brother Jason, and about her being sick—*expecting*, and all that. Well, Rupert wrote right back and said Jason was n't his brother, but was the son of a mulatto woman slave his father owned before the war. He sent Lina ten dollars, and advised her to go up North to her own folks. That letter broke Lina's heart for good and all, but she never told me about it till a day or two before she died.

"After Lina got that letter Rhody bundled her up, and with what she'd saved from washing and the worth of the things in the cabin, put to the ten dollars Rupert Radcliffe had sent, the pair of them started up here. You mind how they got here at last—half dead, and both *expecting*. And you know what end poor Rhody came to, and how Lina sat round shivering and moaning the rest of her mortal

days. We all thought she'd get over the worst of her sorrow and come to her proper senses after Victory was born; but she did n't. She never could bear to look at Victory, and think of the curse that she'd brought to her.

"Well, Lina sat upstairs in her room year after year with sorrow eating her heart out, and when at the end she told me about Rupert Radcliffe's letter, she said it was the way that Jason had fooled her that was worst of all. She had trusted him and given up her own folks and home to go with him, and never grudged what she'd lost for his sake, when all the time he was part nigger and lying when he said his folks were so fine and grand. She turned against him then—and him in his grave—and felt creepy and shaky to think she was bound to be the mother of a baby that was part nigger. She prayed to die and the baby with her before it was born; but God did n't answer her prayer. Just before she died she told me the whole story, and said for me to tell you and Hilda, Jerry, and then Victory, so she would n't marry and fool some white man into believing she was full white. But I never could get up spunk to tell it. I've worn myself out wondering what Victory'll do when she finds out things. I'd rather have her die this minute than to drag through years of misery like Lina did.

"You've got at the bottom of what ails me now, Jerry. I wish it was a case for bluemass and quinine, but it is n't. You'll have to make out to tell Victory, for I can't. She's so high-headed, and her

heart is set against the niggers—all but Liberty. It 'll nearly kill her, I reckon. La, me, I wish those birds would keep their mouths shut a bit. Seems like they have n't a mite of sense when folks are feeling bad."

"Let them sing, Peggy," said Hilda Lane, gently; "maybe they 're wiser than we think, and are trying to cheer us up. I take it God meant for the birds to sing, rain or shine. If they had to hush every time sorrow comes to folks they would n't get much chance to let out what 's bubbling up in their happy little hearts. I 'm glad you 've let out what 's been pestering you so long, Peggy. I take it we ought to share sorrows and happiness with each other. We do sort of share them, whether we 're willing or not. A body that 's happy can't help looking smily, and trouble talks the same way. Of course there are sorts of joys that keep sweetest without bringing them to the light of day, and sorrows too deep for any but God to know and share; but not many. I take it as a rule folks ought to help each other to bear their troubles, and they ought to divide their blessings and their joys."

"Yes, yes, Hilda," murmured Jerry Payson, sadly.

"I take it what won't lay still in a body's mind without bubbling out in signs or looks will have to come out in words sooner or later, or it 's going against nature. Troubles get lighter when we tell them; happiness is n't full ripe till we share it, and sins get blacker and blacker till we 've done what we

can to right them with the folks we've wronged, and with God."

"O lordy!" groaned Andy Peters.

Mrs. Strong had grown calm, and a meditative mood fell upon the small company. Hilda Lane seldom yielded to tears, but found it difficult to restrain them as she searched Jerry Payson's face, longing to relieve him of the suffering that words could not lessen. The old soldier presented a particularly pathetic aspect as he sat with closed eyes, the warm June breezes tossing the silvery hair from his forehead and exposing the blue-veined temples. His features, too, were strangely pale and sharpened, and he was very quiet. Bending toward him at last Hilda Lane touched the flag that mantled part of his body, and asked softly:

"You are n't sick, are you, Jerry?"

"No, no, Hilda," he replied with a start. "I was thinking of what you said about the sort of joys that keep sweet without coming to the light of day, and the sorrows that're too deep to share with any but God. I know there's such as that, but I'd be willing to bear worse trouble than any I've ever had to stand between Victory and what's waiting for her. I wish the Almighty would draw the black out of her blood and put it in mine. I'd give the leg I've got left and my arm, and—O glory, I'd give—yes, I'd give my good eye along with the rest to save Victory from sorrow!"

A burst of emotion—a queer, gulping sob, escaped from Andy Peters. He left his place and

hobbled around the house. Peggy Strong began to weep again, but Hilda Lane, with a bright light in her eyes and a flush in her cheeks, said almost tenderly:

"I take it the same God that fetched you back alive from the war, Jerry, is at the head of things yet, and knows what's best. I know how you feel for Victory—I feel it all through me, because of what's come to Robert—but we have n't lived this long and braved things at the post of duty to be outdone and give up heart now, have we?"

"I reckon not, Hilda; but I'm hard pushed—O glory, I'm hard pushed just now!"

"I know; I feel for you, Jerry. You and Peggy and me will have to stand close together and sort of prop up Victory and Robert, if they need it, till the worst hurt is past. 'T won't do for us to show the white flag or eat the dust before them."

"That's right, Hilda; but who's to stick the knife into Victory's innocent heart?"

"It's bound to be one that loves her, Jerry. If not you or Peggy, it'll have to be me."

"No, you've got Robert on your hands. I'll tell her myself, but I'd rather be shot dead."

"Yes, I know; death is n't the worst thing to face. But do n't fight long with the dread of it. It won't make it any easier for Victory to wait. Maybe she and Robert can comfort each other."

"I'd rather you would n't tell Robert or anybody, Hilda. Let Victory tell it or keep it, just as she pleases. Of course she'll be bound to tell the

Horines, and that 'll end what 's between her and Eric. O glory! I 've watched the pair of them making love to one t' other for years past. It 's been a pleasant sight. Eric hitching up to Victory sort of shy at first, but getting braver by and by, and speaking out like a man when he found out what ailed him. And it tickled me to watch Victory's skittishness wear off little by little till she was willing to let Eric have his say, and glad to hear it. But that 's all over and done with now. The judge would n't give up to have mixed blood in the family, even if Eric could shut his eyes to things."

"La, me, Jerry, I forgot one thing," exclaimed Mrs. Strong, suddenly. "I forgot the letter Lina wrote for Victory. It 's got the whole story I 've told written out, and a heap more that Lina wanted Victory to know. We 'll be saved the telling of things to the poor girl anyway. I 'll give her the letter and let her find out things for herself."

"And there 's Victory and Eric coming right now," said Miss Lane, quietly.

Eric helped Victory out of his trap at the gate and drove away. The girl sauntered up the shady driveway, her hands full of wild flowers, a smile wreathing her happy face. But she paused at the steps of the veranda, glancing at the strained faces of the little group wonderingly.

"What has happened, Aunt Hilda? Has Robert come? Has something new developed? You all look so dismal, you know."

"You'll know directly, pettie," replied Miss Lane, sadly.

"O glory!" moaned Jerry Payson, unable to restrain himself.

Mrs. Strong went forward and, putting her arm around her granddaughter, drew her into the house, saying brokenly:

"There's trouble waiting for you, Victory. It started before you were born. We hate to have you know, but it's got to be. When you feel like reading it, there's a letter waiting for you from your mother."

"From mamma?" exclaimed the girl, blankly.

"Yes. She wrote it before she died, and told me to give it to you before you got to liking any man well enough to want to marry him. But I put it off, and the first thing I knew you and Eric were engaged. I've kept the letter back too long now; but if you'd rather wait—"

"But I don't want to wait another minute, grandma! Where is the letter?"

"La, me, child, do n't jump at trouble that way. It's upstairs. I hate to get it for you."

"I'll go up with you, and take the letter to my own room to read," declared the girl.

When Mrs. Strong had taken the sorrow-laden letter from its secret hiding-place and put it into the girl's hands, she pleaded:

"Let me stay with you, Victory."

"No, no, grandma. Please let me read poor

mamma's letter all alone. But give your stubborn girl a kiss before you go."

Victory did not go down to supper nor would she admit any one to her room that night; but she appeared at the breakfast table, pale, self-possessed, and forbidding. Mrs. Strong began to weep when she saw the white-set face, and approached the girl with a caress, but was gently repulsed.

"Don't be grieved, grandma. I must n't break down now—there's my school to look after, you know," said Victory, steadily. She did not allow herself a glance at the wretched face of her uncle till she came out on the veranda ready for school. He reached out his hand, crying brokenly:

"Don't go without kissing me the same as always, Victory! My heart's broke for you!"

Without a word the girl dropped to her knees, within the encircling arm that had sheltered her in all her childish troubles, and laid her head on the shoulder that had pillowed it so often; but only for a moment's respite. Rising quickly she left a kiss on the old soldier's brow, and went on her way with only a fluttering sigh to ease her anguish. She returned in an hour.

"I can never teach in the Payson Bend schools again, you know, Uncle Jerry," she answered to his look of inquiry. "I have found a substitute for to-day, which is fortunately the last of the term. I did n't see Eric. I can't bear to just yet. If he calls, please tell him to excuse me from coming down."

Before Jerry Payson could speak a detaining word, Victory hastened away to battle with her sorrow in the solitude of her own room.

The atmosphere of the old Payson house was heavily freighted with gloom. Victory, the young queen whose wishes were pleasant laws, and whose smiles had been like sunshine always, was stricken with grief. How could her loving subjects do aught but suffer with her?

Mrs. Strong took her knitting and sat in the upper corridor close to Victory's door all day. Jerry Payson staid on the veranda, covered with his beloved flag, too downcast to sing his daily songs or find pleasure in looking about. Andy pottered around the place restlessly, muttering and groaning.

Eric Horine hastened to see Victory at close of school, and only because he refused to go home without an interview did the girl finally consent to go down to the parlor. Eric was alarmed at her appearance.

"What has befallen you, dearest?" he asked, anxiously. "It must be more than physical indisposition. You are harassed mentally."

"You are right. I am harassed almost beyond endurance," replied the girl, dry-eyed and unnatural in her desolateness. "If I were superstitious I should think a judgment had fallen upon me because of my attitude toward the Negro race. But my own misfortune does not change my opinion nor incline me to be less rigid in drawing the line between the races, even though I have discovered that whoever rejects

Robert Lane on account of the taint in his blood must measure me in the same scale of justice."

"Why do you talk so wildly, Victory? You are feverish, I fear."

"I am feverish, no doubt, Eric; but I am rational and responsible for my words. It is best for you to realize the truth. Our betrothal must end with this meeting."

"Not so, dearest. I will never give you up, come what may, never!" declared the lover, fervently. And when he had heard the story, he repeated his vows and refused to release Victory from her bond.

The young man went home depressed in spirit, but fully aroused to the importance of the issue to be met at the town hall meeting that night. He had a double reason now for desiring the overthrow of the old ordinance.

The seven-thirty train was late that night and, not knowing it, Liberty Despard, who was expecting Robert Lane, had given up looking for him when she heard his step on the porch and ran to meet him. Miss Lane had been detained at Sam Ritchie's, but reached home while the girl was urging Robert to partake of the light lunch she had prepared for him. In truth Liberty was anxious to keep the young man from going down town, knowing that his way from the depot had not lain through the business street, and surmising that he was ignorant of the meeting that was already convening at the town hall.

"Sakes alive, Robert!" exclaimed Miss Lane.

"I was wishing you'd be here. I'm mighty glad you've come. Yes, yes, do sit up to the table and eat a bite."

"But I've had supper, Auntie. I got off at a way station where we were delayed. I told Liberty not to get anything for me."

"Did you have cherry pie?" asked Liberty, insinuatingly.

"Cherry pie? No, I did n't. Where is it? Bring it on—and a glass of milk. I'll make a martyr of myself at that price."

"You can have your fill of cherry pie for a week or two more, Robert. The trees were loaded this year. We've canned a fine lot, and now Liberty and me together make a dozen pies every morning."

"I see. All but one or two find their way over to back street to blind Sally and old Jake Woodson and his bedridden wife and Hepsy Brown and her brood."

"That's right as far as you've gone; but there's a few more. The cherry season do n't last long, and I take it there's real pleasure in making good pies to treat folks with that do n't have any extras for common. But you sit up and eat now. I'll go and change my dress, I feel so hot and smudgy. I've got a heap to tell you, Robert."

"And I'll be pleased to hear all the news. I'm always anxious to grow wiser, you know."

"Yes, I know. But there's news that is n't pleasant to hear. I take it we've got sorts of lessons to learn in this world, heart lessons and head

lessons and others that almost break a body down to learn and bear up under."

"So we have, Aunty. We need difficult lessons to develop our highest nature, sometimes."

"That's how I take it. A body ought to keep looking above the muddles close by to where God is at the head of things. Liberty, you take the rocking-chairs out on the porch. We'll sit there, it's cooler. I'll be downstairs directly, Robert."

"What is the trouble, Liberty?" asked Robert, presently. "You and Auntie seem depressed. Is Mrs. Ritchie dangerously ill?"

"No, I think not," replied the girl, and then to the young man's astonishment she began to cry and ran from the room. He looked after her thoughtfully, and when Miss Lane came downstairs in a clean print wrapper and led the way to the porch, he asked:

"Has anything gone wrong with Liberty, Aunty? It struck me that both of you were not quite natural, and when I spoke about it she broke out crying."

"Sakes alive, Robert, she's crazy with the hurt of things that have come to you. I'd as well pitch in and tell you the whole truth and be done with it."

"By all means. What is it?"

Miss Lane told the story as briefly as possible. Perhaps it was well that the friendly darkness hid Robert's face from her loving eyes. She concluded her recital with the supposition that the town hall meeting was in progress.

Robert asked a few questions concerning what he had heard in mechanical tones, quite as if he were speaking of a matter apart from himself, and then remarked composedly :

"I am going down town awhile, Auntie."

"Well. You know what's best, Robbie," was the gentle reply.

Liberty was at the gate, and knowing that the dreadful revelation had been made, cried out passionately :

"I'd die to blot out your trouble, Robert! O! I'd die gladly, gladly!"

"Die? It is n't dead friends I need, Liberty. It's living ones. But we will speak of this again. Do n't grieve, little sister—go to the house and comfort Auntie."

Easily detecting the ring of bravely borne pain in the man's voice, Liberty broke into fresh sobs, and running to the porch threw herself down at Miss Lane's feet in an abandonment of grief.

At breakfast time next morning Mrs. Strong discovered that Victory was missing from her room. A note explained her absence. She had started South to confirm the story of her parentage, and seek out her Negro relatives, if any were living. She asked that no effort be made to recall her, and promised to return as soon as her mission was accomplished. She left a message for Eric also, as he was unaware of her departure.

The discovery of Victory's absence was a matter

of concern to the household, but Jerry Payson expressed confidence in the girl's ability to take care of herself, and hid his own anxiety under a guise of hopefulness. He repeatedly averred that Victory would be the better for change of scene, and that action was the only thing that could in any way relieve the first cruel shock of the blow she had sustained.

XIII.

AT THE TOWN HALL.

THE meeting at the town hall on the night of Robert's return proved to be a notable event in the history of Payson Bend. In spite of the attempts of the school board at secrecy, the name of the unfortunate applicant had gotten abroad, to the increase of public excitement. At early candle light the hall was packed to its utmost capacity.

Oddly enough the speakers for the evening were Judge Horine and his son, but not until after the company had assembled was Eric appointed as the opponent of his father. The member of the board naturally selected for that position had been detained at home by a serious accident, and the committee were hastily casting about for a capable substitute when the judge sneeringly suggested Eric as a suitable alternate, a challenge which the young man instantly accepted.

It is probable that Judge Horine regretted the outcome of his own sarcastic suggestion for various reasons. But he did not allow any scruple, fatherly or otherwise, to dampen his ardor for the success of his own argument. After the usual preliminaries he opened the debate with the perfect attention of

his audience for a stimulus. He was possessed of strong personality, and, albeit somewhat pompous, was highly esteemed in the community. He had no difficulty in holding the attention of his listeners to the end of his argument, which began with an abusive attack on the demerits and unworthiness of the Negro race in general, and ended with a somewhat lengthy but masterly defense of the ordinance at stake.

When Judge Horine sat down at the close of his speech, with the hearty applause of his audience ringing in his ears, there was a self-complacent smile on his face. He was pleasantly conscious that the house was with him, for the time at least. But his triumph was of short duration.

Without delay Eric Horine stepped forward with the glow of youthful courage and enthusiasm lighting his countenance, and began to speak :

“Mr. Chairman, friends, and fellow-citizens : My opponent appeals to you to sustain an article whose rightful tenure expired when the Emancipation Proclamation was declared. He implores you to hold fast to a moldy policy that should have been superseded by nobler and broader principles of humanity and good will when our Boys in Blue came marching home from the fields where they had fought and bled to preserve the Union and wrench the shackles from a downtrodden race. He beseeches you to defend the borders of our town against a deadly foe, as if we were in a land where savages and pirates and adulterers roam in legions

to despoil our homes of peace and virtue, and rob us of power and liberty!

"Are we, the ruling supporters of this peerless Republic, so lacking in stamina that the dusky race, which we no longer call servant but friend, may in a moment's revengeful remembrance subdue our strength, hurl our proud supremacy to the earth, and usurp our Nation's throne with the rule of barbarism? Is the great Judge of our country's past wrongs to a lowly people not yet appeased by the sacrifice of lives and homes and fortunes laid at the altar of patriotism to conquer a spurious departure from our Nation's creeds, prove the fallacy of unrighteous bondage, and purchase the freedom of a helpless people? Does the Nemesis of the shame that flourished before the mighty blood-fought tragedy of the sixties indeed lurk like a vengeful vampire nursing its wrath and strength, till, like a giant Samson in the majesty of blind rage, it may rise in a paroxysm of might and wreck our dream of security? Shall Negro temerity one day arise, demolish our Government, survive the ruin, and bind the remnant of our race with the shackles we once broke from their ancestors, but failed to cast into the bottomless pit?

"Friends, be it broken or whole, a shackle is a dangerous souvenir—irritating to the former captive, reproachful to the cause of justice, and suggestive of evil to the partisan of unfairness! It would be safer to cast the broken shackles of the past into the furnace of love, and from the molten

metal of chain and clasp shapen a talisman of brotherhood. Then, indeed, the ghostly shadows of retribution would cease to haunt our hearth-stones!

"My opponent defines his premise, determines our dangers, and exaggerates our probable frailties, as if we were incompetent to choose our associates and incapable of defensive morality. Is Payson Bend the retreat of a distinctive clan or species around which a wall must be kept reared and guarded lest venturesome breeds gain entrance with malignant intent to ravish us of purity and contaminate our progeny? Are we so virile, so devoid of innate virtue that we are liable to succumb to the baser elements of our natures, as my adversary fears, at the approach of the unfortunate race? I deny the supposition!

"We are the offspring of stalwart fathers, and are not weaklings that we must shrink from a less cultured race lest we fall under a baleful spell—turn rebel to inherent honor, and sink into the mire of degradation. The humble brotherhood we have spurned has long been acknowledged free by the heart of our Nation, yet we have held our town exempt from such a claim, and called ourselves *Americans*!

"Where are our articles of patriotism? Are they hidden away to rust out with the blood-stained instruments of war in some deep chasm of the vague borderland twixt North and South, where our soldiers demonstrated the principles of equality, lib-

erty, and freedom for the pursuit of happiness? Where is our boasted loyalty to the sad-eyed, dauntless pilot of the Union's crucial experience, and to the noble legion of the Blue, one of whom, shattered but unfaltering in loyalty to his country's honor and glory, is present with us to-night, our well-beloved friend, whose flag has never dipped into the mire of distrust, nor furled its stars and stripes at false commands! Long live our worthy veterans! Long wave the starry banner of the free!

"The framers of our town laws provided a code agreeable to the local spirit and exigencies of their time. But their necessities are not ours. Our great-grandfathers wore knee breeches, buckled shoes, powdered cues, and frills, with dignity and grace; but we should appear ridiculously out of date were we to appear in such attire to-day. And Payson Bend is ridiculous in her attitude toward a race which the world recognizes as a free and accountable people! Such attitude insults our Government, heaps indignity upon the fair Goddess of Liberty, and slurs our boast of freedom!

"We are a progressive people, and must advance with the age! The achievements of yesterday do not content us to-day! To harp on the merits of that old town ordinance to our youth and seek to compel their allegiance to it is calculated to make of Payson Bend a perpetual hotbed for the production of rebels to the policies of our Government, and to engender a spirit of rebellion against national authority. It is unlawful to challenge the wisdom

of the famous Proclamation that startled and thrilled the earth from continent to continent in the sixties! Let us beware how we parade a morbid prejudice before the minds of the young, and so project the shadow of sinful hatred between them and the broadening horizons of to-morrow.

“Away with teachings and precepts that dwarf our perceptions and foster oppression to struggling humanity! Away with the bondage of a specious ordinance that breathes animosity to the legitimate results of the Civil War and its stupendous sacrifice!

“No mere assertion of my opponent can deny the fact that this meeting is a personal reflection upon the man whose application for a position in our schools aroused the lion of race hatred, and called forth this public debate concerning the merits and demerits of the ordinance relating to Negroes, which our town has thus long sustained. And notwithstanding the unfortunate fact that the applicant’s eligibility is contested on the ground that he is a representative of the colored race, I denounce the spirit that rejects him as narrow, selfish, and unfair, and the law that would debar him because of a drop of innocent blood a willful affront to the Constitution of our Union!

“As the adopted son of our good Samaritan, the individual, of whom my opponent would make a scapegoat upon which to heap the shortcomings of an uncultured race, grew from infancy to manhood in our midst unsuspected of racial taint, him-

self innocent of the knowledge as well. As the intimate associate of those of his age and standing, he was well and favorably known at Payson Bend. Parents and teachers held him up as a bright and shining example of industry and obedience. He was the inspiration of our best endeavors, the leading spirit of our sports, captain of our mock militia, Crusoe of our adventures, adjuster of our differences, and champion of the right. He shared with his companions ungrudgingly his pennies, sweets, and happy spirits, and lucky was the boy who went oftenest to his pleasant home to share his bed under the brown gables and partake of the cheer the cottage afforded.

"Nor was heroism lacking in the character of our friend. Perhaps a hundred of my listeners tonight were present at a school picnic on the banks of Silver Creek ten years ago, when an incident occurred that horrified the company. Two venturesome little girls slipped from the bank into Death Hole, and but for the bravery and instant action of our friend they would be dust with the dust of Crown Hill to-night, instead of being in this audience two of Payson Bend's fairest belles.

"I can not recount the debts we owe this man, for as the willing messenger of his foster mother he has been the bearer of more substantial tokens of cheer and assistance to the sick, afflicted, and needy of our community than any dozen other boys or men of our number. Useful, honored, and loved, he has now far outrun most of us in educational pursuits, and is the equal of any of us in all things, and our superior in a few.

"Friends, shall we now pronounce this man an outcast? Is it not enough of disaster that out from the deceptive clearness of the skies a lightning bolt has fallen upon him, rending his soul with fiery trial and scorching his prospect? Shall we, the friends of his happier days and the sharers of his prosperity, forsake him in the hour of bitter need?

"My opponent does not consent that our friend is a white man; I do not consent that he is a Negro. Does not the superior force rule in all things? Our friend is eight times more white than black. Pray to which race is he closest kindred? All agree that he is in the incarnation of the highest qualities of noble manhood, and I defy you to bring a representative from your race and mine that is a worthier example. He has, in ignorance of his own defect, knocked at our gates with the confidence of a friend with rich gifts for our acceptance. Shall he hear only the harsh command, 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels!'

"Shall Payson Bend continue to enforce the ordinance this meeting was called to consider? That my opponent declares is the question before us to-night. I will answer it first by asking another. *Can a nation or a community maintain an ideal attitude of authority and fairness under the proposition that its rule is of the people, by the people, and for the people, without the unconditional surrender of all sectional rebellion and individual prejudice?* I believe not. Nor can a citizen who claims the protec-

tion and benefits of our land with justice or honor deny the hand of fellowship to a fellow-countryman, or close the gates of a city against him simply because of the tinge of his skin. For we live in a country whose grandest proposition is that 'all men are created equal!'

"Mr. Chairman, friends, and fellow-citizens: We have reached a crisis in the affairs of Payson Bend. It is for you to decide whether or not we shall inaugurate a new era, let the dead past bury its dead, bid farewell to local despotism, and open our gates to the rule of that truer democracy of thought and living which, irrespective of accident of birth, gives to merit its lawful dues. Think well before you act, for injustice has its bitterness, and ingratitude its aftermath of vain remorse.

"My opponent emphasized the danger of the amalgamation of your posterity with the inferior race were you to set aside the contested ordinance. Does he forget that many members of your posterity will naturally strike out into the world's maelstrom of evils in the fulfillment of ambition and progress? I declare to you that there is but one protection against amalgamation or any other crime in this world, and that is *individual purity*! If you instill godly principles into the lives of your children they will be able to meet the foes of purity, iron-clad, at home or abroad!

"Furthermore, my worthy opponent would have you believe that Payson Bend is a clean and hal-
lowed spot in a land smitten with decay and infamy.

I would convince you that Payson Bend, in its defiance of Freedom's imperial law, is a plague spot on the white bosom of fair Liberty; and I beseech the sturdy, godly citizens of Payson Bend to wipe out the iniquity!

"In the name of Payson Bend's own brave soldiers, living and dead, who once faced the fearful ravages of war shouting the battle-cry of freedom, and struggled through blood and anguish to sustain our peerless Union, I appeal to you! In the name of our grandfathers, lying at peace on Crown Hill, whose withered hands can no more append a departure from the ancient rule they shaped for other necessities than ours, I appeal to you! In the name of your posterity whose conceptions of charity our present narrow provisions must malform, and in the name of Humanity whose highest laws we have ignored, I appeal to you, young and old, to supplant that obnoxious old town ordinance with a new decree that shall accord with the true meaning of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness!"

"Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!" yelled Jerry Payson, unable to restrain his enthusiasm an instant after Eric's closing appeal. And then such a thunderous applause went up from the audience that Payson Bend's town hall was in danger of having its walls rent asunder.

Eric Horine was always a favorite with his fellows, and upon this occasion the necessities of love and friendship inspired him with unusual fervency

of manner, and so made his language doubly effective in spite of its bombastic nature. The relation of the disputants had also lent particular significance to the stirring appeal of the younger man, and biased the audience in his favor. But from all points of view the unnatural affray between father and son was extremely unfortunate, and was destined to bear evil fruits.

When the prolonged ovation had subsided somewhat, Judge Horine, with a steely glitter in his eyes and frigid coldness in his smile, advanced to the front of the rostrum with the dignity of a champion, outraged but neither disarmed nor conquered, and proceeded with his short closing speech. His bearing was tense with suppressed antagonism, but his voice was cool and deliberate in its scathing sarcasm when he said:

"Mr Chairman and fellow-citizens: It is always with more amusement and indulgence than irritation or disgust that we of the maturer and wiser generation listen to the frothing egotisms of a callow stripling but lately freed from his mother's apron-strings. It is not necessary for me to descend to any further defense of the question at stake. The noisy attack of the battering ram that has expended its fury against the ironclad ordinance I uphold, and against the honorable terms of my argument, has not in the least affected the gravity of the matter under consideration, nor the duty of the citizens of Payson Bend to abide by the matchless policy of race protection and perpetuity.

"I therefore propose, with the consent of those concerned, to arrive at the ruling sentiment of this people by a conclusive expression from them as a body, individually and collectively. I propose that each and all who favor the ruling of the particular ordinance under discussion to-night shall remain in this auditorium after the signal for dispersion, and that each and all opposers pass out of the building as speedily as possible. We shall then be able to determine, in a satisfactory and orderly manner, whether or not it is the will of our citizens to retain the contested town law, or their desire that official measures be taken for its annulment."

After the chairman had repeated the method proposed for rendering a decision as to the winning side of the controversy, the usual closing formalities were observed, and the signal for the breaking up of the meeting given. In fifteen minutes the densely-packed throng had left the hall. Four aged citizens out of all that vast gathering remained, and with Judge Horine and one other member of the school board made up a company of six who stood firm to the oft-questioned policy of the law whose designers slept undisturbed beneath the ivy of Crown Hill.

XIV.

AN UNFORTUNATE ENCOUNTER.

JUDGE HORINE went home from the town-hall meeting incensed at the town people in general, and against his son, who had won so signal a triumph over him, in particular. He stalked through the house slamming each door in his passage, and finding no one below re-enforced his temper with a glass of brandy, and then stamped upstairs and into the bedroom, loudly demanding of his trembling spouse:

"Has that young donkey come home?"

"Hem'n. Do you mean Eric?" asked Mrs. Horine, trying to hide her indignation under a pretense of sleepiness.

"Yes, Madam, I mean your son, Eric. He is no son of mine!"

"I think he came in a short time ago."

"You *think*? I warrant you pounced on him the moment he came, and laughed in your sleeve to hear of the success of his insulting attack upon me!"

There was discreet silence in the direction of the bed until the irate man, in searching for a match, fell over a chair.

"I left a light burning down in the hall, Judge.

I thought you would bring it up with you," commented Mrs. Horine, meekly. "Wait, I'll get another lamp."

"Stay where you are, Madam!" replied the man, angrily, finding his way out of the door and banging it after him. But the woman sat up in bed and listened anxiously as the heavy footsteps passed along the hall to stop at Eric's door.

"Is that you, father?" asked the young man, cordially, his room being in darkness.

"It is the master of this house, sir! I came to inform you that my roof is not broad enough to shelter us both."

"Very well, I will remove from beneath it in the morning," replied Eric, respectfully.

"To-night is the proper time for your removal, sir, since you chose this night publicly to insult me and slander the standards of your ancestors."

"To-night, then, if you demand it, father. But I did not consider that issue a personal matter between you and me. I tried to meet the question as best I could at so short notice—at your suggestion, father—and spoke my honest convictions. Would you wish me to go after any cause unless I did my utmost to win?"

"You are a puppy! a sneaking, contemptible puppy! The first mongrel cur ever bred under the name of Horine. You have made me the laughing stock of the town with your confounded harangue!"

"I did n't mean it as a personal affront to you. But I do n't regret my success. I have more reason

than you imagine for rejoicing over the result of the meeting."

"No doubt you find it furiously funny to gloat over your father, who has been the first man of Payson Bend for thirty years. You are a knave, a traitor, an infernal donkey!"

"You are ungenerous, father. I am sorry the affair has caused a rupture between us; but it may interest you to know that the outcome of to-night's issue provides that Payson Bend shall not close its gates against my future bride."

"Your future bride?" thundered the judge. "I have labored under the impression that Victory Radcliffe was your prospective bride. Has your sudden infatuation for the cursed Negroes led you to exchange her for Liberty Despard? But nothing more probable."

"Nothing less probable. Victory is my chosen bride. But she has recently discovered that her father was but two generations removed from a Negro ancestress. You will understand my interest in the issue now."

"Heavens and earth! How much more degeneracy has invaded our neighborhood? Have I lived to face the hour when my son proposes to pollute the blood of my descendants by marriage with a negress?" lamented the judge, yielding to momentary weakness. But his anger rose almost instantly. "Eric, if what you say is true, you shall never marry Victory Radcliffe," he declared, solemnly.

"We will not discuss that event, father."

"But I say you shall not marry her! Do you propose to defy me?"

"I do n't wish to quarrel with you about my promised wife, sir."

"Which means that you intend to marry her, does it?"

"I arrived at my majority five years ago."

"Arrived at your granny's foot! Answer me. Do you propose to marry Victory Radcliffe in the face of my opposition?"

"I would prefer your consent, father."

"Then you mean to marry her?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your great-grandfather killed his own daughter for attempting to marry a mulatto."

"Yes, I know. He was a murderer and a suicide. It gives me no pleasure to recall his memory."

"And you refuse to recognize the fact that there can be no compromise between a Horine and a Negro, or the offspring of one?"

"Why argue any longer, father?"

"You intend to marry the descendant of a Negro!"

"I intend to marry Victory Radcliffe," replied Eric, steadily.

"You do? But I say you shall not!" was the frenzied retort.

The darkness of the room was faintly illumined by the starlight which came in at the window, and revealed to the crazed father the dimly-outlined form of his son, who stood near it. There was a

metallic click in the pause that followed the last assertion of the judge, before he said desperately:

"This is a matter of life and death, Eric. I say *you shall not marry Victory Radcliffe!* What have you to say?"

"I shall marry her *unless you kill me, father,*" replied the young man, firmly and fearlessly.

A pistol shot cut the air sharply, followed by a low moan from Eric, and a stifled scream from his mother, who rushed into the hall and came into contact with the judge, who pushed her back into her room and commanded silence in fearful tones. The woman staggered to the bed and fell upon it half fainting with terror, while the judge knocked various articles from the dresser in his attempts to find the small china matchesafe belonging there.

"Where are those blasted matches?" he roared at last.

"There's a wall case by the door—left side," replied Mrs. Horine with chattering teeth, as she threw a wrapper over her night dress.

The man found the matches and lit the lamp, but the glass globe slipped from his shaking hand, and striking the marble top of the dresser crashed into a hundred fragments. A volley of profane utterances followed.

"I'll get another," whispered Mrs. Horine, gliding away like a shadow and quickly returning with another chimney, which she adjusted to the smoking lamp with trembling fingers.

Glancing at his wife's anguished face and shivering body, the judge began to realize the situation,

and said harshly: "If you can keep your calliope of a mouth shut, come along!"

A few steps brought them to Eric's door, where they paused, looking into each other's eyes, Mrs. Horine shudderingly, and the judge in sudden fear of the result of his rash act.

"I did n't hit the young donkey. What are you acting the fool about?" he asked in a low voice, as if she had made a ghastly accusation. Then he stepped into the room. Eric was not there, but a trail of blood stained the floor and eloquently attested to a tragic deed. Stooping with the light to examine the glistening drops the judge sickened at the sight, and the fury that had inflamed him swooned in the clutch of remorse.

Growing brave with the arousing of maternal instinct, Mrs. Horine suddenly threw off her cowed manner, and taking the lamp from her husband's unresisting hands faced him with blazing eyes.

"You have done your worst by our boy, Judge. Now let me find him and do my best by him in peace!" she said, cuttingly.

With strength born of love the woman traced the crimson stains down the stairs, across the hall, and to the edge of the front porch, where they ended or at least were not visible. A careful search of the premises gave no further clue to the wounded man.

Judge Horine sat in the library, while his wife hastily removed the blood-stains from the floor, watching the shaft of light that fell through the doorway from the hall lamp. He felt stupid and oddly bewildered from the reaction of his ungovern-

able passion and overindulgence in brandy. "What next?" he asked of the patch of yellow light, trying to formulate an answer to his own query.

"I am sure Eric has gone to a physician," said Mrs. Horine, coming in so noiselessly as to startle the man. But he caught at the words, and was hurrying away to verify the hope, when a boy ran in at the gate with a message. It was only a line, written on a bit of wrapping paper, which read:

"Have gone on midnight train to seek a surgeon
at St. Louis. ERIC."

The Judge hunted up a time-table and studied it carefully, and to purpose. The local freight train passing through Payson Bend two hours later carried him westward when it wound around the foot of Crown Hill on its way to the not far distant city.

Three days passed drearily by, each bringing a message to Mrs. Horine from her husband, who had not found Eric. And then the Judge came home, gaunt and haggard. After a long consultation with his wife, they closed the house and flitted away on the midnight train—the one that had borne Eric away that other memorable night.

In the meantime other scenes in the Payson Bend drama were being enacted. Other actors were making mysterious journeys and living through strange experiences. And above all else of momentary importance to the general welfare of the community were the grewsome shadows of death that beleaguered the town.

XV.

OTHER JOURNEYS.

THE day succeeding the debate was a quiet one at the cottage. Miss Lane returned to Sam Ritchie's for the day, and Robert went to B—— to interview the quadroon housekeeper at Colonel Berkley's. Liberty remained alone, depressed and anxious.

Upon reaching the town hall the previous evening Robert had found it impossible to gain entrance without forcing his way through a crowd of eager listeners that blockaded the door. Embarrassment decided him to abandon his desire to learn how the issue was progressing, and he returned to the cottage. Before retiring he wrote a respectful withdrawal of his application for the position he had coveted, deciding not to accept it whatever the result of the meeting. When ready to start to B—— in the morning, he said to Liberty, with forced cheerfulness:

"I shall be back to-night, Liberty, and then your troubles will begin. I intend to put you through your p's and q's at a rapid rate."

"I'm prepared for any speed you choose, Robert," replied the girl, brightly; but after his departure the light faded from her eyes. She had detected the keen suffering in the mentor of her childhood

and youth, and no disguise of manner could blind her loving penetration.

The small city of B—— was only a few miles from Payson Bend. Robert left the cottage in ample time for the morning train, and was surprised to find Victory Radcliffe at the depot. He was shocked at her haggard face.

"Why, Victory, are you off on a journey?" he asked.

"Yes, and on an errand similar to your own, I imagine. I did n't know you were in town, Robert. You must have come in last night," replied the girl, wearily.

"Yes, I came last night. But you are ill, Victory. You are not fit for a journey."

"I am well enough physically. I am on my way to search out my relatives and prove my ancestry. I shall not rest till I have faced the utmost horror of the truth. O Robert, what bitterness fate has held in reserve for you and me. Aunt Hilda has told you of my grandmother's confession, no doubt."

"Not a word. She revealed only that which affects me. What have you to do with that, Victory? How can you liken any trouble of yours to the painful discovery that has come to me?"

"By a strange fatality I am also proven to be the offspring of racial admixture. I shall know the whole truth before I return to Payson Bend."

"Please God, there is some grievous mistake. You bear not the slightest physical hint of racial taint. It is different in my case."

"The train is coming. I shall have a half-hour in which to tell you something of my history before you reach your station," responded Victory, going forward to board the train.

A handsome, olive-complexioned woman answered Robert Lane's ring at the Berkley residence. She was tall and shapely, and wore her plain black dress, white collar, and apron with an air of dignity. Her eyes met Robert's with recognition and startled inquiry.

The young man noticed the look, and moreover the woman was familiar to him. He knew he had seen her before, and stared at her reflectively, tracing in her face a certain likeness to his own and feeling intuitively that she was his mother.

"Are you Mrs. Berkley's housekeeper?" he asked at last.

"Yes. Come in," replied the woman, composedly, leading the way to a small reception-room at the end of the hall. But when she had closed the door her calmness forsook her. She had read her visitor's mission in his sorrowful dark eyes.

"Robert," she began at once, "you know who I am. Did your information come from Judge Horine?"

"Indirectly, yes. The story is true, then? There is no possible mistake?"

"Yes, it is true that I am your mother. But I have suffered much to keep the knowledge from you. Judge Horine has betrayed a sacred trust wrung

from my lips at a moment when I was desperate with longing to claim you."

"He is human. A critical issue impelled him to reveal the fact. I have come to learn the whole truth. I know nothing aside from the bare fact that I am your son. Your word and *that*," said Robert, pointing to the mirror in which both faces were reflected, "is sufficient proof of my relation to you."

"Yes, you resemble me, but you resemble your father's people also. I was considered handsome in my youth, and was alluring and passionate, with enough culture to make me entertaining. My mother, a fine-looking mulatto, was the mistress of a white planter, and I was reared in elegance and ease. My father's wife died a few months before my birth, and my mother was given control of the household. My education began when I was very young—a governess taught me with my father's white children—and I was allowed every advantage given the other children at home. My childhood was happy; but in my latest teens the war broke out and changed everything. My father was killed in the army, and his white children took possession of the property. My mother was shrewd, and during her prosperous days had managed to secure enough money to fit up a small hotel, which paid fairly well. I acted the lady, and made the place attractive for the young gentlemen who chose to patronize the establishment. Your father came oftenest of all. He was infatuated with me, and

finding that I would not permit his advances without marriage he made me his wife, and took me home to live with his widowed mother on the family plantation."

"Then I am the child of wedlock?" asked Robert, eagerly.

"Yes. At least I believed my marriage legal. I have been virtuous always," replied the woman, with dignity.

"Thank God for that! What was my father's name?"

"Rupert Radcliffe. He is still living, I think."

"Rupert Radcliffe!" demanded the young man, excitedly, recalling the story Victory had told him an hour previously.

"Yes, Rupert Radcliffe, of Nolville. He came of a fine old family."

"Had he any brothers?"

"A younger brother, Jason."

Robert stared at the woman absently a moment, but refrained from mentioning Victory, surmising that his mother was unaware of the girl's existence. "You were saying that my father took you home to the family plantation when I interrupted you," he said presently.

"Yes, Rupert's mother was a proud woman, and refused to receive me as her son's wife. I was soon very miserable, and Rupert, growing weary of my tears and complaints, turned against me and declared our marriage illegal. That revelation drove me frantic, and I ran away at once, determined to

end our connection forever. I came North and sought out my old governess, with whom I had frequently exchanged letters. She had become the wife of Colonel Berkley, and received me kindly. I told her my troubles and she took me to a private hospital, where I remained till you were born some weeks later. I had made up my mind to destroy you as soon as I could get an opportunity. I did not want you to live to be a wretched outcast. You were a month old when I planned your death. In the meantime I had grown to love you dearly. I carried you to the creek one night, intending to drown you. Three times I tied weights to your little body and held you out over the water, but I could not let go; my heart failed me. At last I started back to the city; but it was very dark and I lost my way. I finally saw a large house sitting back from the road, and thought it must be the home of wealthy people. I thought perhaps they would take you and raise you as their own child without suspecting your ancestry—you were so very fair. I crept to the portico and laid you against the door, then rang the bell loudly, and ran across the street and hid under a hedge. I waited till I saw a light stream out of the door, and knew they had found you. I came to Mrs. Berkley, and told her I had given my baby away. She employed me at once, and I have been in her service ever since. But I was desolate without you, and soon went back to the large house to reclaim you. I discovered that it was the county poorhouse, and without betraying

my secret I learned that Miss Lane, of Payson Bend, had already adopted you. I heard glowing accounts of your benefactress, and it seemed selfish to think of taking you away from a home where you would have good care and opportunities, besides growing up without the stigma of your race to cloud your future. I tried to be content, but at times my longing for you nearly drove me mad, and I would go to Payson Bend and steal up to Miss Lane's bright little sitting-room window at night and watch her while she rocked you to sleep as tenderly as if you were her own child. The sight always comforted me for weeks to follow. I have wished a hundred times that my tongue had been cut off before I betrayed my secret to Judge Horine. But since it is too late to prevent the evil that has befallen you, let me serve you. I have watched your life carefully, and give Miss Lane credit for what you are, for I could not have done so well by you. I have done nothing for you except to give you birth, and that was a sin against you. I will crawl at your feet to help you now; nothing will be too hard, only show me how to serve you. I have saved my earnings for you. Do with them as you please."

"Thank you," said Robert, with emotion. "I do n't know where my pathway will lead, now that my former plans are so greatly shaken; but I shall be able to make my living, never fear. Perhaps you may be useful to me in ways I can not foresee just now. I would be pleased to know all you can tell me of my father's family and of your own."

"I can give you little information of the Radcliffes beyond what I have told you, and scarcely more of my own ancestry. My grandmother was a full-blooded African slave bought by my father's father, and my mother had a white father, but what particular man remains unknown. My father was, as I have said, a white planter. I know nothing more of my family, but the blighting presence of Negro blood in my veins has ruined my life and happiness. I have inherited longings and ambitions from my white ancestors that have battled constantly against the curse that defiles me. My soul has endured years of torture. Life will be a difficult problem for you, too, Robert; but you are a man and may surmount obstacles impossible for me to have conquered."

Robert returned to Payson Bend in the evening, worn but not dismayed. The fire of a lofty spirit, wounded and shackled but undaunted, shone out of his fearless dark eyes when Miss Lane met him at the cottage door and took his hands into her loving clasp.

"Is it all true, Robert?" she asked, with pathetic eagerness, unconsciously betraying a hidden hope that some one had made a mistake.

"Yes. But what of that, Auntie? Is n't this big, generous world willing to give every faithful laborer his lawful hire? Well, my faculties are normal, my body is free from disease. I am a free American citizen! Do n't think I shall allow a drop of blood to crush me, or make a coward of me."

"Sakes alive, Robert, you're just what I took you to be. You've got backbone, and if a body's got plenty of that there's nothing on earth can get them down and *keep* them down. And you mind this, Robert—God did n't let things get in such a mess without mighty good reasons. I take it He's at the head of things yet, and knows what's best. And things might have been a heap worse than they are."

"That's true enough, Aunty. I might have grown up without your love and careful training. You have taught me the way of faith and hope."

"I can't take all the credit, Robert. I tried to head you right and keep you going that way, but you was n't fractious or hard to manage. You could see the right from the wrong mighty easy when you was a mite of a boy."

"If so, it was you who taught me to discriminate. I can recall times when less loving vigilance and patience would have left me weak where I had need of strength. You molded my earliest ideals from sturdy materials, and they have governed me always."

"It's mighty pleasant to hear you talk that way, Robert. Liberty's got supper ready, so we'll eat now; then I wish you'd tell about your jaunt over to B——, and what you found out."

"Certainly, Aunty. I mean to tell you and Liberty the whole story, but it must go no further. There are a few things I do not wish even the Paysons to know at present, if ever."

Notwithstanding the withdrawal of his application, several efforts were made to persuade Robert to accept the position he had formerly desired. He fully appreciated the honor tendered him, but firmly refused it. He could not foresee any good to come from the experiment, and as a mere personal triumph he would not consider it for a moment.

In the meantime Robert had promptly written an account of his discoveries to Flossie Bruce, who was still absent from home, reserving only the name of his father. He also released her from her betrothal vows. Furthermore, he called on Captain Bruce and reported his action.

Captain Bruce regretted the necessity for the rupture of the engagement, but highly commended the movement, and frankly declared that in the circumstances he could never consent to the marriage. He was a staunch supporter of the creed that rejects any and all compromises between the races.

Robert was greatly puzzled over the absence of Eric Horine. He had called at the house the morning after the town hall meeting, but Mrs. Horine had simply announced that Eric and his father had both gone away during the night, and that the time of their return was uncertain. Something in the woman's manner forbade questions, and Robert had refrained from annoying her further. But it grieved him to leave without seeing his lifelong friend.

On Thursday evening Robert Lane set his face toward the South, the land of his fathers. A half-hour out from Payson Bend his train met the be-

lated east-bound passenger, which had aboard faithful Flossie Bruce, who was hastening home to protest against the release her lover had forced upon her. But neither of the twain felt the nearness of the other as they swiftly passed, borne in opposite directions by the fiery-hearted monsters of throbbing steam and fearful power. Still that was not strange, many another soul has escaped its complement by so little as a hair's breadth, and known it not. And between these two, whose hearts love had captured and taught to thrill in unison, there was more than flight and muffled vision, or passive unconsciousness. The stern Nemesis of nature's broken law had interposed a drop of blood which, swelling into a bridgeless torrent, had cruelly slit the highway of love and made two paths of one.

Captain Bruce speedily pronounced his mind to Flossie, who seemingly yielded meekly to her father's will. And wise on-lookers, mistaking her beautiful attitude of obedience for resignation, smiled and whispered to each other, "It is well with sweet Flossie Bruce; she is forgetting."

But let me whisper to you, kind reader: Into unchosen paths a woman's feet may be set against her will by might of man or power of God; and she may follow leadings smilingly, and yield to drivings meekly; but be not deceived. The beloved idol of a woman's heart can never be dethroned against her will, though the winding sheet of hope and the mantle of pride may shroud it from human eyes forever.

XVI.

THE BREAKING OF ANOTHER PIPE.

THE affection of Andy Peters for Victory Radcliffe since her babyhood had been his greatest source of pleasure. Upon her he had lavished the hidden tenderness of his thoughts, and the fulfillment of her wishes had been pleasant laws. As it was his habit to consider all things that conflicted with his own content as personal grievances, the revelation that had brought sorrow to Victory appeared as an affront to himself through the race of his hatred.

For several days after the meeting at the town hall there was a steady downpour of rain, and Andy spent the greater part of the time at the stable brooding and muttering. Thursday evening being exceedingly damp and chilly, a fire had been kindled in the sitting-room, and Jerry Payson sat in the cheery glow singing "My country, 't is of thee," quaveringly, as if striving to warm his saddened spirit in the fire of patriotism. But it was impossible for him to forget that Victory, the household's pride and darling, was absent and suffering. It was difficult to sing at all, but the old soldier was struggling

manfully toward the end of the hymn, when Andy, who was hovering close to the fire and scowling with smothered rage, suddenly turned upon him, exclaiming:

"I should think you'd get done singing about sweet liberty and the like, now you've had the devilment of them pesky niggers you helped set free brought home to you plenty plain to see what's come of it! If they had n't been running loose all over the country Lina would n't have been fooled into marrying one, and Victory would n't be next thing to crazy over what's come down to her."

"You'll have to blame the white folks that are mixed up in the mess, Andy. If Jason Radcliffe had n't been more white than black, Lina would n't have been fooled. The mixing was done before the niggers got free. You'll have to blame the white men, not their slaves, for the beginning of the trouble. I'd fight just the same if I had to do it over again, and I reckon I'll keep on singing the songs of freedom and sweet liberty till I'm done with this world."

"Looks like you have n't a mite of pity for Victory!" snapped Andy, fiercely, rising to fling some fresh chips on the fire, and then facing about again.

"Pity? That is n't the right word for my feelings, Andy. I've ached and ached for the poor girl till I'm a jag of pains inside. But I do n't blame Victory's trouble on the Land of the Free. It's got nothing to do with it."

"It's got something to do with the cussed niggers! You're a fool, Jerry, or you'd own up to it that old Abe better have been hung before he emancipated them."

"Never, Andy, while I've got breath to yell! Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!"

"But drat the niggers!" roared Andy, furiously, raising his pipe and bringing it down upon Jerry Payson's head with terrific force.

With a low moan the old soldier sank down in his chair, a nerveless heap. The bowl of the earthen pipe had struck his temple sharply enough to stun him, and inflict several small wounds as the pottery crushed. Blood gushed from the cuts, and Hilda Lane, who opened the door at that moment, hastened forward, astonished and horrified. Andy, instantly repentant, bent over the unconscious patriot, frantic with fright and remorse.

"Do n't die, Jerry! O lordy, Jerry, do n't die!" he cried.

"You tell Peggy to come here, and then run for the doctor, Andy!" commanded Miss Lane, supporting the wounded man's head against her shoulder while she stanching the flow of blood with her apron.

"Jerry, Jerry, do n't you hear? Do n't die without forgiving what I've done against you!" wailed Andy, pathetically.

"If you want Jerry to live, why do n't you help things along? Tell Peggy to come here, and then

do n't waste any time on the road to the doctor's!" demanded Miss Lane.

"O lordy, lordy!" moaned Andy, running out of the house and down the wet driveway, unmindful of rheumatic pains as he hobbled along the street through the rain to Dr. Hilton's office, where he paused only to gasp:

"Come to Jerry's lickity split, Doctor! He's dying—bleeding to death! O lordy!"

It seemed remarkable that so small a weapon had wrought such disaster, but the force had fallen on a vital spot and the injured man revived from his first slight swoon only to sink into another of longer duration. Dr. Hilton did not speak hopefully, and Andy Peters, frenzied with fear that his fiendish act had sent his best friend beyond recall, spent most of the night roaming about the rain-swept premises, groaning and murmuring.

Liberty came over from the cottage during the evening to offer her services; but the doctor had returned to remain till morning with his patient, and giving the girl his lantern—for it was very dark—advised her to go home and sleep so as to be fresh for the next night if she should be needed. As she passed outside, Liberty's attention was arrested by the peculiar utterances of Andy coming from an excavation recently dug for a vegetable cellar, and fearing that he had fallen into it and injured himself she approached the place, holding up her lantern and peering into the darkness below. Andy was

kneeling in the watery basin with clasped hands and face upturned in the rain, lost in the throes of supplication.

"Let Jerry live, God A'mighty!" he was beseeching. "Let Jerry live, and I'll quit cussing the niggers!" And then the light of Liberty's lantern flashed upon him, and he opened his eyes and blinked up at her wondering face a moment rather dazedly, before he scrambled out of the pit howling angrily: "The devil take the niggers! Get away from here you pesky black nigger!"

The girl, not the least alarmed, sped on her way without a word; but drenched, chilled, and miserable, the man watched the light of her swinging lantern as she fled through the inky night toward the friendly shelter of the cottage, mumbling to himself:

"The whole creation's against me! I can't get down low and humble to ask a favor of the Almighty, without a nigger trots up to aggravate me. I did n't get my say out, and what I did get out is spoiled, I reckon."

Toward morning Miss Lane came out and found the man still hobbling around in the chill darkness.

"Andy," she said, with quiet severity, "if you're done chasing the old Harry round in the mud, you'd best come in. Ellen has built a fire in your room and put some dry clothes to warm for you. You'd best get into your dry things as quick as you can, so you'll be fit to go into Jerry's room. He's come to his senses, and he asked for you first thing."

"O lordy!" cried the man, joyfully, slouching into the house and hitching up the stairs with painful haste. "I reckon that prayer was n't spoilt after all. I mind now I did n't say just *when* I'd quit cussing the niggers, drat them!" But his spirits fell when he came down to Jerry's room; for the wounded man, again unconscious, lay with ghastly face and dulled senses, unheeding the hoarsely whispered:

"O lordy, do n't die, Jerry! Do n't die without forgiving me all I've done against you! Jerry, O Jerry!"

"Be still, Andy, or you'll have to go out of here," said Hilda Lane. Her own face was almost as pallid as the one on the pillow, but she gave no other sign of the anxiety she was bearing.

Too restless to sit still, Andy dragged himself back upstairs to his room, where he cowered over the fire for awhile, quaking with fear and chilliness. Miss Lane sent up Ellen, the kitchen maid, with a cup of hot tea, but the girl soon hastened back, saying:

"I'm afraid Andy's gone stark mad, Miss Lane. He was n't in his room, but I heard him stumbling up the garret stairs and slipped up to see what he was doing, and there he was climbing out of the cubby hole in the roof. I'm afraid he's going to jump off and kill himself. I wish you'd go up and stop him. I'm too scart of him."

"Sakes alive, Ellen, if he's bound to jump off I do n't know as I could hinder him. But I'll go

up and see what 's to be done. The doctor 's with Jerry now."

Miss Lane went up to the garret, but paused at the foot of the ladder leading to the trap door in the roof, through which the rain was drizzling. She could hear Andy's voice, desperately beseeching: "Let Jerry live, God A'mighty, and I'll quit cussing the niggers from this day on. Maybe You let him get worse again because I did n't say just when I'd stop cussing the niggers. I'll leave off this minute if you'll let Jerry come to his senses and get well. O lordy, let Jerry live, God A'mighty! The whole world 's against me but him!"

Hilda Lane wiped her eyes and motioned Ellen to follow her downstairs, where she said: "I do n't feel called to meddle with Andy, Ellen. He 's driven to pray it seems, and has n't any notion of jumping off the housetop. I hate to have him up there in the rain and cold, but I mind his mother was just that queer acting about praying. She 'lowed it did n't look sensible to pray inside of a house with laths and plaster and shingles and what not between a body and God. She 'lowed He 'd be put to it hard enough to hear so far off, anyhow. I do n't lean to that way of thinking myself. I take it if a body's heart is set heavenwards and open to God, there 's no sort of hindrance that can shut Him off from what 's prayed to Him. I reckon Andy will come down when he gets his satisfaction. His mother was a praying woman and lived according to her

light, and I take it the children of such as that are bound to come to their knees sooner or later. It does look wild notioned for him to get on top of the house in the rain when all out door is free to him; but we can't judge him, and so you 'd best not pester him. Maybe you 'd as well fix up his fire again, and when he comes down fetch him another cup of hot tea."

XVII.

LIBERTY DESPARD'S CALL.

THE week ushered in by the unhappy debate between Judge Horine and his son at the town hall was one of peculiar misfortune, not only to the families clustered around the Payson corner-stone, but to the community in general. Friday, the day after Andy's attack on Jerry Payson, chanced to be the day following Robert Lane's departure for the South, and was also the day of Judge Horine's return from his search for Eric, to bear his wife away so mysteriously. Furthermore, that particular Friday was the date of an important consultation of the medical staff of the town over several suspicious cases of illness that had closely succeeded a three weeks' epidemic of a mild eruptive fever that had raged in and about Payson Bend. On Saturday a number of red cards bearing a specific signal were placed on the houses where the suspicious cases were located. On Sunday a dozen new cases were reported, and several deaths recorded. The churches were closed, and the news was circulated that a malignant form of smallpox was well established in Payson Bend.

The people were immediately panicstricken. Householders closed their doors and windows

against the disease-laden atmosphere, and made hurried preparations to leave town. The afternoon trains bore away a crowd of frightened women and children, and many more were completing arrangements for departure the next day, but on Monday morning the proclamation went forth that escape was cut off. Payson Bend had been placed under quarantine.

A fearful war between life and death was waged during the next six weeks, and Crown Hill was wounded almost daily to receive new tenants under its greensward. The physicians labored ceaselessly against fearful odds, and were utterly disheartened over the meager help they were able to secure. There were no resident trained nurses; people yet unaffected were afraid to expose themselves to the dreadful disease, and it was impossible to obtain efficient help from abroad. Several persons who had survived the malady in former years willingly lent their services, but the urgent demand for nurses of any kind was far beyond the supply.

Hilda Lane was fully employed in helping the Paysons, and in daily visits to care for Mrs. Ritchie, who was still quite ill. But the kind-hearted woman, who was already denying herself needful rest, thought it possible to do with still less sleep, and so offered to give an hour or two each morning to the service of Dr. Hilton; but he forbade her to go near the contagion lest she carry infection to those who had the first claim to her care.

The havoc of death was appalling. One morning

Dr. Hilton paused to have a word with a friend, who was watching an undertaker load some coffins into his wagon for delivery, and after some conversation remarked:

"I would consider it a direct Godsend if I could get hold of even one thoroughly reliable nurse to place in charge of my worst cases during the critical stages of the disease."

Liberty Despard was approaching the pair, carrying a basket of dainties which Miss Lane had prepared for some of her pensioners. Halting beside the harassed physician she said:

"You are in great need of nurses, Doctor. If there are any among your patients who would be willing to take me, I am ready to serve them. I am conscious of a clear call from God to the work, and besides, I want to do it for Aunt Hilda's sake. I believe God has called me in her stead, for her heart is breaking to do something for the sick that are without proper care. I think you can trust me to carry out your directions faithfully, and I have my white dresses, caps, aprons, and other wearing apparel packed ready to leave home at a moment's notice."

Utterly taken aback at the unexpected offer from one who had little reason for self-sacrifice to the Payson Bend people, Dr. Hilton stood silent for a moment, staring at a streamer of crape fluttering from a doorknob across the street. Then he summoned courage to meet the girl's inquiring eyes, and asked:

"Have you spoken to Miss Lane about this?"

"Yes. The call came to me night before last, and I told her about it yesterday."

"What did she say?"

Liberty smiled, but glanced above the steeple of the church near by, with a look in her eyes that reminded Dr. Hilton of the scene he witnessed in Miss Lane's hayloft twenty years before.

"Aunt Hilda is odd, you know, Doctor. She did n't appear to hear what I said, but slipped off upstairs to her room for awhile. When she came down again she merely said, 'I take it God's at the head of things, Liberty, and if you feel called to help the folks of Payson Bend in this awful pinch, I won't lay a straw in your way.'"

"God bless that woman!" exclaimed the physician, finding sudden need of his handkerchief. "She's got the biggest heart ever put into a woman's body, I believe. I appreciate your unselfish offer, Liberty, and gladly accept it. I shall want you to make my house your headquarters. I will drive to the cottage to get you and your clothes whenever it is convenient for you to come."

"That will be in an hour, Doctor," replied the girl, softly.

Barely two hours later Liberty Despard was installed at the bedside of Mr. Hodge, whose wife lay coffined for burial, and who was himself in a critical stage of the loathsome disease, with only a deaf and very incompetent old woman in the house to serve him. Fevered and delirious, the sick man gazed at

his new nurse when he first discovered her, and rolling his swollen tongue about, muttered thickly:

"Your chair is at the rear of the pews, Liberty. What are you doing up here in front?"

"Well, you see the church is quite empty now, Mr. Hodge," the tactful girl replied, soothingly. "I'll take my own seat when I've made you more comfortable. Swallow this medicine now, and then I'll put a fresh compress on your face to ease its burning." And thus the brave girl began her patient ministries.

Liberty Despard had inherited her mother's dusky beauty, and being always scrupulously neat in her person and attire, was a wholesome and pleasant presence in the sick-room. Her voice was soft and musical, her touch tender and magnetic, and her ready tact, vigilance, and perfect obedience to directions made her an invaluable dependence for the physician.

For five weeks the demand upon the services of the once despised negro girl was constant. It was, to say the least, a remarkable coincident that wherever she nursed life came out conqueror over death. This fact being marked by her former enemies turned the tide of public favor toward her. The sick speedily clamored for her presence, in the vague belief that she alone could pilot them safely through the dangers of their malady.

But there is always a limit to physical endurance. The young nurse grew thin and haggard from loss of sleep, and from the prolonged strain of un-

usual responsibilities. When the last severe case was safely through the critical stage the faithful girl swooned at her tasks one morning, and, greatly concerned over her condition, Dr. Hilton took her to his own home and sent for Miss Lane, who had not seen Liberty since she left the cottage to begin nursing.

"I'll take Liberty home right now," said Miss Lane, when the Doctor had explained his fears that overstrain had brought on a serious degree of nervous prostration that would be extremely difficult to manage, even if time did not prove the girl to be in the incipient stage of the scourge to which she had been so long exposed. "I've felt heavy-hearted about Liberty, and I've got everything ready to do my best by her. The Paysons don't need me now, and Mrs. Ritchie is up and about again."

"I would much rather keep her here, Miss Lane," said the physician, earnestly. "I owe the girl every care and attention. I feel reproached that I did not suspect her condition in time to prevent this complete breakdown. But she has labored along so energetically and uncomplainingly that I was deceived, and failed to notice that her vitality was so nearly exhausted."

"Yes, I understand how you feel, but I want my girl home now," insisted Miss Lane. "She'll be happier to come to her senses in her own room. I've stood in place of a mother to her, and know best how to make her comfortable. You can do for her there the same as here as far as doctoring goes, you know."

I want to do my share for her, and that 's best done at home. Things might have been worse, I reckon, and God 's at the head of things, I take it. We 'll have to trust to Him to do what 's best."

And so Liberty, unconscious of the consternation that chilled the town at the news of her collapse, oblivious of the stream of distressed friends that flooded the cottage at all hours with anxious inquiries concerning her, and unaware that heaven was besieged with prayers for her recovery by those she had served so well, lay in the shadow of death.

Perhaps of the many that implored the Omnipotent to restore Liberty Despard to health none prayed so constantly and fervently as Mr. Hodge, one of the members of the committee that had once sought to banish the Negro infant from the borders of Payson Bend. For Mr. Hodge firmly believed that through Divine favor he owed his life to his dusky nurse. And he was but one of many that felt the same measure of indebtedness to her.

XVIII.

AT THE RADCLIFFE PLANTATION HOUSE.

THE inhabitants of Nolville, a sleepy, little Southern town, were scarcely aroused to the necessary labors of the day when Victory Radcliffe alighted from the morning train after a wearisome journey, and allowed Rush, an aggressive Negro lad, to conduct her to a hotel. After such refreshment as the place afforded, the girl made a few inquiries of her host, a ponderous and talkative specimen of his class.

"Will you please direct me to the Radcliffe residence?" she asked.

"Why, of co'se, of co'se I will, Miss! Just say which one—Mistah Rupe't's or the old Missus'?"

"Is the old lady Mr. Rupert's mother?"

"Shuah, and a high-blooded old lady she is. She set the pace for the nabobs round her befo' the wah."

"I think I will go to her house. Where is it?"

"It's a mile and mo' from town. I'll take you there and back fo' a dollah."

"I prefer to walk."

"Shuah. Well, then follah this road down the hill, and up and down two mo' hills, and half way up

the next you 'll come to a big gate with stone posts topped off with stone balls, on the right side of the road. You turn in there, and you 'll be on the Radcliffe plantation. Just follah the straight road, with the big trees on each side, till you come to a musta'd-colored house—that 's Mistah Rupe't's—and then keep on through the cotton-field till you come to the house with the west chimney off even with the roof and the east chimney badly sagged. That 's the big house where the old Missus lives. It was a fine place befo' the wah. Yes, Ma'am! The front of the house is polished stone, and the pillahs of the po'ch are ma'ble. Nothing like it in the country round heah, but it 's on its last pegs now, and so is the old Missus. She lives there with two free niggahs now; but befo' the wah the place swa'med with slaves and the majah had money to smoke."

"Thank you for your information, sir," said Victory, breaking into the man's reminiscent mood, and starting on her way.

For some unaccountable reason the girl's spirits rose as she walked briskly along the highway after leaving the town behind her. Even the weeds that fringed the path, the gullied hills, and rickety fences were suggestive and entertaining. The merry birds, too, seemed to pursue her and awake her to the fact that, in spite of hampering misfortunes, she was yet young and healthy with every faculty alive, a great world for a habitation, and the future before her.

The way so plainly described by her host did not seem long to Victory, who entered the Radcliffe

domain sooner than she had anticipated, and traced her way to the old plantation house without difficulty. But although the morning was warm and sultry, the front windows of the house were closed, as was the door also. Repeated knocking brought no response. The visitor did not mean to be easily daunted, however, and made her way around to a side door which stood open. A middle-aged negress came from a rear room at the first knock.

"Fo', de Lawd's sake!" she exclaimed, when she saw Victory. "I s'pect yo'se got lost, ain' yo', honey?"

"No, I think not," replied the girl, pleasantly. "I have called to see Mrs. Radcliffe."

"I'se 'fraid yo'se gwine be dis'pointed den. De ol' Missus do n't nebah see comp'ny," responded the woman, in soft, drawling tones of regret.

"But it is very necessary for me to see her. Please tell her that I have come many miles to speak with her. Perhaps she will make an exception of my case."

"I'se 'fraid not, honey, but I'll go and ax huh. Yo' des come in and take a seat by de window a li'l' while."

When the girl was seated the negress approached her with a tarnished silver tray, holding it out and smiling insinuatingly. Victory was slightly puzzled for an instant, but, without betraying herself, quickly drew a card from her purse and laid it on the salver. The card bore the simple inscription of "Victory Radcliffe."

The apartment into which the visitor had been ushered was the dining-room of the once stately mansion. A cavernous fireplace yawned under a huge mantel. The heavy woodwork, massive furniture, and worn floor were thickly covered with dust, and the walls were black with smoke stains. The air was tainted with the odor of tobacco, and Victory leaned out of the window to inhale the fragrance of a jasmine outside.

In the meantime the negress had entered the private room of her mistress and announced:

"Yo'se got comp'ny, Missus. I'se mos' skeert ob de young Miss. She's de libing hant ob yo'se'f in de big frame long side ob Massa Radcliffe, in de lib'ry."

"But you know I never receive any visitors except Colonel Whitmore, Dosie," said Mrs. Radcliffe, impatiently, putting on her spectacles and taking the card from the salver. "Victory Radcliffe!" she murmured, half startled. "Where is she from, Dosie?"

"She des 'low she come f'om fa' off."

"Is she genteel looking?"

"I tol' yo' she's de libing hant ob yo'se'f in yo' young days!"

"Then get out my black silk and my best lace collar, Dosie," commanded the old lady, with brightening eyes.

The dressing process was slow and difficult. But a woman who has once been a beautiful society leader never ceases to thrill at the remembrance. Mrs. Radcliffe, stricken with sorrow and age, was

inspired to receive her young visitor by Dosie's meager but significant description of her.

"Is my hair becomingly arranged?" asked the old lady when her toilet was nearing completion.

"It looks lubly!" declared the woman.

"Then you may get the small morocco case out of that left-hand drawer. I shall wear my diamond brooch. The major always liked me to wear a jewel. A valuable one speaks for itself and lends dignity to the wearer. I am ready now. Give me your arm and help me downstairs very carefully, Dosie."

"Des laik yo' was a wax candle, Missus!" replied the faithful attendant.

Victory rose when she heard steps coming near the dining-room and went forward to meet Mrs. Radcliffe.

"I am pleased to see you," asserted the old lady, with hospitable dignity, holding herself erect with an effort, and keenly surveying her young guest.

"It is very kind of you to receive me, Mrs. Radcliffe. I am grateful beyond words," replied Victory.

"Go and open the windows of the library, Dosie. We will sit there," directed the old lady, leading the way to the once magnificent room, and going directly to the life-size portraits of herself and husband, taken in the heyday of prosperity and happiness.

"Dar! What I tol' yo', Missus?" cried the negress.

"You may go now, Dosie," remarked Mrs. Rad-

cliffe, facing about and motioning her guest to a chair as she seated herself.

"Are you visiting at my son's?" she asked of Victory.

"No, ma'am. I arrived at Nolville on the morning train and came directly here from Nolville. I walked."

"Indeed? But where is your home, and what particular branch of the Radcliffe family do you represent?"

"That is what I have come many miles to determine. Will you pardon my presumption, and kindly furnish me with the information I desire?"

"Certainly, my dear, if I can."

"Did you once own a slave so white that no one would have suspected his Negro blood? A man known by the name of Jason Radcliffe?"

"No. But my youngest son was named Jason. We owned a black slave who was known as Black Jas, because of his devotion to my son Jason in his childhood, from whom he could hardly endure an hour's separation. He and his wife, Dosie, are my only servants now."

Every vestige of color forsook Victory's face as she listened. Leaning forward she asked piteously:

"Then who was my father? His name was Jason Radcliffe. He claimed to be your son and the brother of Rupert Radcliffe. He was shot some months before my birth while trying to rescue a Negro, to whom he was attached, from an unjust execution by a mob. My mother wrote to Rupert

Radcliffe and told him of the sad fate of his brother and of her own destitute condition, begging to be taken into the family of her husband until after the birth of her child. He replied that he had no brother, and that Jason Radcliffe was the son of a former slave of his family, and hence his adoption of the name. He pretended to deplore the deception that had been practiced upon my mother, and advised her to return North to her own relatives, which she did to drag out a life of misery in brooding over the wrongs she had received at the hands of the man she had loved. And now, pray—who am I?”

“What was your mother’s name?” asked the old lady, with suppressed excitement.

“Lina Strong.”

“Then you must be the child of my son Jason!” cried the woman, forgetful of her infirmities as she rose and reached out her trembling hands toward the girl. “No wonder Dosie said you were the image of me as I was in my youth! Jason was the image of me, too! Come, my dear!”

Victory sprang up and clasped the wavering form of her grandmother in her strong, young arms. “It’s too good to be true!” she declared, and then began to sob. She had not shed a tear since the letter so fatal to her peace had fallen into her hands, but now the floodgates were opened to relieve her of all pent-up emotion. Mrs. Radcliffe, too, was overcome with the joy of her discovery, and murmured words of delight and comfort brokenly.

When they had grown calmer Victory sat down

on a hassock beside her newly-found relative, and told the simple story of her happy young life and of the few recent days of sorrow. And so finally the conversation drifted back to Lina Strong and her short-lived happiness as the wife of Jason Radcliffe. Victory produced the letter written for her by her mother, and also the one written by Rupert Radcliffe twenty years before, which Lina Radcliffe had inclosed in her message to her daughter. Mrs. Radcliffe read the written pages with misty eyes, often removing her glasses to polish them before proceeding.

"I have no reason to doubt your identity as my granddaughter, Victory," she said, as she folded the letters. "And you are anxious, no doubt, to learn something of your father's family and the cause of his estrangement from it."

"Yes, I am greatly interested, as you surmise."

"My husband, Major Radcliffe, fell in the Civil War, and, although this plantation escaped the ravages of those brutal Northerners, our fortune vanished with the freeing of our slaves. Our surplus had gone to assist the Confederacy before the major's death. After the war I found myself a widow with a large plantation destitute of laborers on my hands, and with two young sons to rear. I managed to secure a few Negroes to cultivate a part of the land on shares, and so lived along for several years till times improved and experience had taught me how to manage.

"By the time my eldest son reached his majority

the plantation was paying fairly well. But Rupert was a spendthrift and given to recklessness in general. Without my knowledge he entered into a so-called marriage contract with a handsome, educated quadroon and brought her home. Outraged at the insult I refused to recognize the quadroon as my daughter-in-law. We lived in continual dissension for some months, and then Rupert quarreled with the woman, who disappeared from my house on the eve of childbirth. My son had wearied of her; but conscious that she had suffered at his hands I commanded him to find her and make provision for her comfort. He made some effort, but never obtained any clue of her so far as I know.

"After his riddance of the quadroon, my son married a white girl of fairly good family. But still we were not happy. Rupert wanted full control of the plantation, and his wife of the mansion. I would grant neither. The major's personal fortune had been invested entirely in slaves and in a smaller plantation on the river, which was laid in ruins during the war. This property was my own inheritance, and I would not yield it into the hands of a spendthrift.

"My younger son, Jason, who was quite different from Rupert in disposition and character, was finishing his education at a school in St. Louis. I believed he would be capable of managing the plantation very soon, and hopefully awaited his homecoming. Rupert was jealous of my affection for his brother, and redoubled his demands for a con-

tract that would insure his own permanency as agent of my affairs. But I remained firm, for my fondest hopes were centered in Jason. Judge, then, of my surprise and anger when he wrote that he was soon to marry a Northern girl, Lina Strong, who was attending a ladies' seminary in St. Louis. I forbade the marriage, but my wishes and authority were set aside. Later I refused to receive Jason and his bride at the plantation. He did not reply to my last forbidding letter, and I did not know that he had brought his wife down to a small Southern town across the river till long afterwards.

"Ten unhappy years passed away, and then Dosie, in burning a lot of trash cleared from Rupert's desk, found a letter, which she brought to me. It was the one your mother had written years before, in which she told of Jason's death and of her own situation. The letter went to my heart. I sent for Rupert, and asked why he had concealed the death of his brother from me. When driven to it, he confessed his selfish reasons, and acknowledged something of what he had written your mother. A scene then transpired that ended our last attempt at friendly relations.

"I compelled Rupert to remove from my house to the small residence where he still lives, and gave into his control a portion of land for his own support. His wife and two children died during the yellow fever epidemic a few years ago, and he depends upon an old negress, a former slave of the family, to attend to the affairs of his household.

"Before learning of Jason's death I had secretly hoped for his return, and determined to forgive his offense and make him master of the plantation when he had humbled himself sufficiently to ask my favor. Since my discovery of his death I have had no more interest in life. I did not know where to seek for your mother. I had no way of finding out whether she or Jason's child had survived its birth.

"Left alone I withdrew to myself. The mansion is fast decaying, and the cabins have fallen to the ground. The bulk of my land lies idle, but Jas, with seasonable assistance, raises enough cotton to support me and Dosie and himself in moderate comfort. For weary years I have been waiting for the shadows that fell upon me during the war to press me down into the grave. For the name of Radcliffe means but ruin now.

"This is the happiest hour that has come to me since the major's death, my dear. I am sure I shall feel differently, now that I have seen you. And now I must call Dosie and send her on an errand," concluded the old lady, trembling with excitement as she struck the tarnished call-bell on the table beside her. Dosie appeared so promptly that Victory suspected her of being very close at hand.

"Dosie, this is my son Jason's daughter!" announced the mistress, exultantly.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, Missus, is dat de truf?" exclaimed the negress, with well simulated surprise.

"Yes, there is no doubt of it. Go to my room

and get the letter from Jason's wife that you found so long ago. It is in the little spring drawer of my secretary. Here is the key."

When the woman returned with the letter, Mrs. Radcliffe carefully compared it with the one Victory had brought. The handwriting was the same. With a smile upon her withered face the old lady leaned back in her chair and sighed her satisfaction.

"Dosie," she said weakly, as her nerves relaxed from their severest strain, "it is cold. Light the fire and then call Jas from the field. We must have some groceries from town, and I want to send Colonel Whitmore word to come and dine with us this evening. We will have dinner at seven, and three courses will be sufficient; but have them good. We will lunch at one. Prepare a chicken, some cream puffs, and a bottle of the major's choicest wine from the secret cellar. Let us have lunch earlier if you can prepare it. I am very faint."

"Dat all's gwinter be done d'rectly, Missus," declared the woman, cheerfully, removing the fire-board and exposing a pile of pine knots and fagots, which she set ablaze before leaving the room.

Dosie did not attempt to serve luncheon in the dining-room, but prepared a small table in the more habitable library, delighted with the opportunity to exhibit a cloth of exquisite linen and a few bits of rare china and silver which she had extracted from their safe hiding-places.

After luncheon Mrs. Radcliffe fell asleep in her

chair, but her young guest was not lonely. Relieved of her recent burden, she entered into the novelty of her surroundings with keen enjoyment, remembering that she was in the historic Southland—the realm of glowing sun and grewsome shadow, in and about which must always linger thrilling memories of romance and chivalry and mystical splendor.

“And this,” thought the girl, “is the house where my brave young father was born. The father I have dreamed about and longed to see and touch and love.”

The room was large and dimly lighted, the shutters of the eastern windows being closed, and the south windows having their curtains nearly drawn, besides being heavily shaded by the wide porch without. But the musty atmosphere was full of fantastic charms for the girl, who sat dreamily fancying what the apartment had been like in its glory days.

Tall bookcases loomed up somberly at intervals, jealously guarding their wealth of knowledge behind diamond-paned doors, and on the broad moldings above them bronze busts of warriors and poets and wise philosophers kept silent company. Family portraits looked out of tarnished frames, smilingly, or sternly, or pridefully serene. Among these were paintings of Rupert Radcliffe in the triumph of his first trousers, and of Jason in velvet kilt and wide lace collar, over which fell long curls of silken hair. And here and there about the room were pedestals and brackets bearing rare vases of alabaster or

statuary of Parian marble. Golden candelabra, whose empty sockets were filled with dust, flanked the silent timepiece on the mantel and kept a tryst pathetic and long unbroken. And dust was everywhere—dust and cobweb draperies. Yes, there were many mute reminders of bygone splendor in the old library, but none so fraught with pathos as the time-worn woman, sweetly asleep, exhausted with the stress of unexpected joy, the late gift of a kind Providence.

A flood of tenderness swept into Victory's heart as she regarded her aged relative, whose once glowing garlands of happiness and pride had lost their loveliness long ago. A living reality of blight truly was Dorothy Radcliffe; but she would never be less than a queen dethroned. Her crown of hair was like spun silver shimmered with pearls, and she possessed fairness of skin and daintiness of lip and nostril in spite of Time's manifold markings. Her frock, though worn and out of date, was lustrous silk to the last thread; her collar, yellow and old-fashioned, was priceless lace; and her one jewel was a peerless diamond whose fire neither time nor tide could quench. But the air all around the slumbering queen was laden with the sweet, melancholy fragrance of lavender and thyme.

After an hour's restful sleep, Mrs. Radcliffe opened her eyes, slightly dazed for a moment. But Victory was discreetly studying the faded tapestry panel of a rosewood screen, and allowed her relative

to resume their former conversation, as if no interval had elapsed.

Black Jas had brought a couple of stout colored girls from town. One to assist Dosie in her preparations for dinner, and one to scrub the dining-room, and afterwards clean and air one of the large front chambers for Victory's occupancy.

XIX.

THE DINNER GUEST.

WHILE awaiting the arrival of her dinner guest, Mrs. Radcliffe explained to Victory her reason for inviting him.

"Colonel Whitmore, my dear, was the lifelong friend of the major, as well as an intimate associate of my own childhood, and he has been the one constant friend of my widowhood. He lives only a few miles from here, but owns a large plantation farther back in the country, which is worked by a large force of Negroes. He has the reputation of being a miser, but that is because he is too proud to publish the object of his penuriousness. He drives to his back plantation nearly every day, and his one great desire in life is to redeem his honor by paying off a heavy debt incurred through the freeing of his slaves during the war. To that end he has economized, and won the ungenerous name he bears. He is a hero in his way, as well as a gentleman of honor.

"Like myself, the colonel has outlived happiness. His wife did not survive their fallen fortunes, and there were no children. He lives in the ruins of his old family mansion, which was partly wrecked by Union soldiers. It is even more desolate than this,

but is sacred to him because of the pleasanter memories connected with it. A couple of blacks attend his wants, and his business occupies most of his time. I consider him one of Nature's noblemen, Victory, but I had two particular reasons for inviting him to dine with us to-night.

"Since he is really my sincere friend, I wish him to know of my good fortune in having found the daughter of my favorite son. I am very proud of you, my dear. I am also anxious to give him an opportunity to learn all you can tell him of the negress mentioned in your mother's letters, because Jim Despard and Rhody, his wife, were born on the colonel's plantation, and were children when they were set free.

"The mothers of both children returned to Colonel Whitmore after two or three years of freedom, and claimed his protection. They are now old and almost helpless, but live in a comfortable cabin on the plantation and are supported by the colonel. Rhody went into the service of a white family in Nolville when in her teens, but Jim remained with the colonel till he reached his majority, when he married Rhody and went across the river to find employment. That is the last we heard of the pair, although Colonel Whitmore has made many attempts to find them, and is totally ignorant of the fate of either. Your mother did not mention the name of the Negro on whose behalf Jason met death in her letter to Rupert, and if there was any published account of the Negro's execution the news did not

reach this vicinity. Probably the incident was hushed up, as is often the case in the South in like affairs. Colonel Whitmore will be interested in the fate of Jim and Rhody, and delighted to hear of their daughter Liberty. It will please him to carry the news of her to her two aged grandmothers."

"How very strangely the mysteries of our lives unravel sometimes!" said Victory, thoughtfully, just as Dosie came in exclaiming:

"De cun'l's coming 'long de road wid dat oda'sus ol' niggah Buck on top ob de ol' yaller coach, laik a brack roostah on de top ob a show wagon, Missus! An' Jas he's done busted de long tail brack coat, he's boun' to hab on if he's gwinter wait on de table! He's gittin' mos' oda'sus fat, Jas am. I tol' him he's des 'bliged to keep face fo'wa'ds, 'cause de busted place am up an' down de back."

"Very well, Dosie, tell him to be careful to face the colonel constantly at any rate," replied Mrs. Radcliffe, with unmoved dignity.

"Yes 'm. I s'pect Miss Vict'ry's des r'lations an' do n't count, nohow," observed the woman, gravely, but a smile flitted over her anxious face when Victory filled the room with merry laughter.

A few moments later Jas solemnly announced Colonel Whitmore, and the girl felt like pinching herself to make sure she was not dreaming, so fanciful seemed the nature of her experiences. But unmindful that her fresh beauty and youthful charms were as unique in their peculiar setting as any part

of the scene in which she was an actor, Victory courtesied to the colonel, and extended her finger tips as prettily and quaintly as if she and the occasion were back in the mansion's palmiest days.

Colonel Whitmore was a man of striking appearance, tall, sharp-featured, keen-eyed, with a lofty look about his brow and a winning smile about his lips. His bearing was courtly, and his daintily-sprigged waistcoat, high stock, and much-worn dress suit of black broadcloth became him exceedingly well.

"Your granddaughter?" he exclaimed when Mrs. Radcliffe presented the girl. "Ah, are my eyes tricking me? Is it not yourself, Dorothy, arisen from the ashes of the past? Your name is Dorothy, is it not, my child?"

"No, sir," replied the girl, to whom the last question was addressed. "It is Victory."

"Victory? Ah, then you have come from the North. We never name a Southern queen Victory. Who chose your name, my child?"

"My Uncle Jerry Payson. He left parts of his body on your battlefields, and has been chained to a chair ever since; but he is still a hero, forever cheerful and loyal to the necessity that wrecked his strength and activity."

"And why not? 'They laugh who win!' Only a coward whines over the cost of victory! We, who lost all, mourn because we had not more to lavish on the cause we were forced to yield. The best of us are loyal to it yet in our hearts. We were driven

to break bread with Peace, but few of us have eaten what we broke; we dropped it with our swords, to molder with the rusting blades in the ruins of our hearthstones. Do you count it treason that the Southern soldier's heart is as loyal to his ideal government to-day as when he marched to face your Northern cannons in its defense?"

"Were I to answer truly, Colonel Whitmore, you would straightway think me inconsistent."

"To be that is the privilege of the fair, Miss Victory. We do not chide who charms us most. But after all is said, I've heard a woman loves a soldier brave, no matter what his loss has been. Is it true?"

"I can not speak for all my sex. I love the Union with all my heart, and yield ready homage to the victorious army of the North for what they won at such a price. But I do admire the dauntless bravery of that proud, defiant Southern host as well, for had I been a man living at that crisis I should have gone to battle in company with my Grandfather Radcliffe, no doubt, and fallen with him, if need had been, to support what he thought right."

"Hear, Dorothy! It is the warm South that speaks, and not the icy North! Your granddaughter is ours—the springtime of yourself come back to cheer our winter days. Look, Dorothy! she is truly the resurrection of your youth."

"Your flatteries are wine to my vanity, Colonel. But before you came I was already persuaded that Victory imaged my youth. Even Dosie noticed her likeness to my portrait."

"Dinna!" announced Jas in pompous tones from the doorway, bowing low and then backing down the broad hall and into the dining-room.

The dinner was well cooked and served, but Victory found it painfully difficult to maintain her gravity throughout the meal. One swift glance at Jas at an instant when he was "face fo'wa'ds" to the colonel had been sufficient fully to arouse her sense of the ridiculous, and she dared not look in his direction again, but continued to be mirthfully conscious of his predicament. Intent upon serving, he was constantly forgetting to keep "face fo'wa'ds," and was likewise serenely oblivious of Dosie's whispers and coughs of reminder from the half-closed door.

The offending coat was full to overflowing with the Negro's corpulency, and the split along the middle seam increased with every movement till only the collar connected the two halves of the garment, the divisions having continued to separate till the tails of the once correct dress coat had parted company at the waist line, never to meet again.

After returning to the library, Victory, at the request of her grandmother, related what she knew concerning Jim and Rhody Despard, and then gave a detailed description of Liberty's life and attainments. She also told a great deal about Miss Lane and her charities, but without other design than to avoid a too lengthy story omitted to speak of Robert Lane, except as regarded his position at the cottage

and his helpfulness to Liberty. There seemed no occasion to speak of his late discoveries.

As Mrs. Radcliffe had surmised, Colonel Whitmore was intensely interested in the recital. He asked many questions concerning Liberty and her ambitions. But aside from Liberty's intention to enter a freedmen's university to complete her education and fit herself for future usefulness to her race, Victory could tell little of the girl's plans.

"Perhaps Liberty's ambition to spend her life in intimate association with her race will weaken when she comes into actual contact with them in their crudeness. One Northern born and gently reared in the midst of thrift and comfort can scarcely comprehend the Negro in his real condition, as we Southerners do," said Colonel Whitmore, reflectively.

"But Liberty is not altogether ignorant. Aunt Hilda has taken her to St. Louis every fall during Fair time for years, and allowed her to spend days at a time in visiting the poorest homes in the Negro quarters of the city, as well as in reviewing them at their various occupations and in their churches and educational institutions. Of course, these investigations were superficial, and revealed only certain grades of Negro life, but they helped Liberty to realize the needs of her people. She has also an interesting and valuable collection of books and other literature descriptive and illustrative of the Southern Negro and his environments. And she has numerous scrapbooks in which she systematically arranges

miscellaneous articles bearing upon the Negro problem. In fact, there is n't anything very important published on the subject that does not find its way to Liberty's little study room, for Robert is constantly on the watch for such items, and Aunt Hilda gladly furnishes the funds. Liberty is a thorough student, and I think she really has a very fair comprehension of the condition of her race."

"Theoretically no doubt. But the reality is always different from the pen picture. It is one thing to know the names of things, and quite another to identify them by actual touch. Does Liberty feel compelled to finish her education at an institution for Negroes?"

"It is her choice. She can name every freedmen's college in the land, I think; but she more frequently speaks of Hampton, Tuskegee, Fisk, Howard, and Atlanta. She likes to study the characters of the enemies of her race, as well as its friends and benefactors, and keeps lists of the names and addresses of all that particularly interest her. She also keeps track of many educated Negroes, watching the development of their careers with much interest. At present she is deeply engrossed in a study of the Black Belt. She has dusky heroes, too, and is a warm admirer of the kingly champion of her race at Tuskegee, as well as a sympathetic adorer of the more soulful wizard of Atlanta. Indeed, Liberty is very well informed, Colonel Whitmore."

"Ah, who could doubt it in the face of your generous plaudits?" asked the colonel, glancing at

the glowing face and sparkling eyes admiringly. "And now what are your own persuasions? Are you an advocate of equal rights between the races?"

"As a principle, yes, sir. But a principle may have limitations."

"You are wary. A hint of Yankee ingeniousness flavors your speech. Where would you discriminate?"

"I am not generous in my limitations."

"Then you are interesting. You draw a circle, and not a mere line which may be lengthened or shortened to suit a circumstance."

"I had not realized my position so positively before."

"Ah, I suspicion that it is the South that speaks now."

"Not clearly so, I fancy. I would give the Negro more latitude in some respects than is granted him here. But I would certainly draw my circle together so as to leave him outside of any possible degree of social equality, and make intermarriage with one of the superior race a crime."

"A crime so defined must have its specific penalty."

"Yes. It should be death."

"Hear, Dorothy! It is the smothered sentiment of the South that speaks!" cried the colonel, exultantly. Then he rose and went close to the portrait of Major Radcliffe. "Miss Victory," he said presently, "your grandfather expressed himself to me in almost your exact words once, and in this very room.

You have inherited your grandmother's beauty, and something of your grandfather's spirit. He was a hard master over his slaves; but he was as tender as a woman in his friendships and as steadfast as the Almighty to his principles. Are you like that?"

"I have never been tried but once, and that for the strain of a few days only," replied the girl, with shadowed eyes.

"I will tell the colonel about your trial some time, my dear," interposed Mrs. Radcliffe, gently.

"I shall remind you of the promise, Dorothy. But it is getting late. Buck is showing signs of impatience. I must return to my castle. I hope to meet you again, Miss Victory, and trust that your sojourn at the plantation will be pleasant. But you must not judge our magnificent South by the devastated scenes around here. Nolville has little impulse for growth, and only when the cotton crop comes in for shipment in the fall does the town arouse from its stupidity for a season. We are still stunned from the clamor and climax of war. But this desolation will pass, must pass, for new generations are arising to build upon our broken fortunes. The spirit of progress will soon breathe upon our fallow fields and chilled hearths, these benumbed scenes will thrill, and, presto! the land will blossom as a rose!"

"But we who have felt the wounds of wrong and supped with bitterness shall have passed away, Colonel," said Mrs. Radcliffe, plaintively.

"That is a surety. What would you ask better? We have had our day, and it was glorious while it

lasted. Let us bid Godspeed to our successors, and bid them build better than we builded. Hush, Dorothy, we have wept enough. Let us smile in these sunset hours, and so hark for the call to leave these battlefields and climb the heavens. Sorrows are fleeting ills. Heaven is eternal."

"I am reminded of Aunt Hilda, Colonel," said Victory, softly. "She is always cheered through her trials by the reflection that 'Things might have been a heap worse, and God's at the head of things.'"

"Ah, we need more of that kind of philosophy," replied the colonel, again absorbed with the major's picture.

"But things could n't have been worse with us," declared Mrs. Radcliffe, bitterly.

"Hush, hush, Dorothy," chided the man, gently. "We might have had less to give the Confederacy. And the major might have lived to behold our downfall and suffer what we have endured."

Victory's eyes filled with sympathetic tears. Impulsively she slipped to her knees and threw her arms about her aged relative.

"We have strayed into the shadows," said the colonel, regretfully. "I fear I led the way. Forgive me, Dorothy, I should not have lifted the drapery of the past. Nor would I have you think that our splendid South is one vast 'banquet hall deserted,' Miss Victory. This scene is small and untrue to our grander prospect. You should visit our great centers, where wealth and progress and power hold carnivals. You should review our prosperous sec-

tions, our thriving towns, seats of learning, and behold the glories of our larger cities and capitals, our fine cotton plantations and markets, and meet the enthusiastic people of our land."

"I should be pleased to review the grandeur of the Southland, Colonel," replied the girl, softly, "but the deserted hall of the Radcliffes charms me more than could the glories of your cities or the glitter of your capitals."

"Did you hear, Dorothy? It was the Old South that spoke! Have done with tears—your rose is blooming at your side!" exclaimed the colonel, bending to take the girl's hand in a farewell clasp. "You are ours, Miss Victory. The icy North is but your foster parent!"

"Perhaps I am a union of North and South. I love them both, but which more, which less, I shall not try at this moment to determine," retorted the girl, laying her pink palm against the colonel's.

"Ah, the Yankee speaks again!" asserted the man, smilingly. "Well, I have said, 'We do not chide who charms us most.' I must be reconciled to trifling inconsistencies in you, I think."

Long after she went to her room Victory sat at a quaint rosewood desk writing letters, one to Jerry Payson and one to Eric Horine, little dreaming that neither of the men would be able to receive them. Some one, probably the colored girl who had prepared the room for its guest, had filled a dragon-blue vase with rosemary and jasmine, and set it on the windowsill for the night wind to kiss as it stole

into the room. The air was full of fragrance, and when the young Northern girl crept into bed, weary—O, very weary, but peacefully happy—she found the bed linen faintly scented with lavender and thyme, and fell asleep with a smile of content wreathing her lips.

After a few golden days the young guest set out for home, carrying with her the history of her father's family, the tender, loving blessing of her Grandmother Radcliffe, and many delightful memories. But Victory was not the only one benefited by her short visit in the South. Mrs. Radcliffe was suddenly awakened from a long season of melancholy seclusion to find life taking on new colors. The future thrilled with hopefulness for the lonely woman who now hugged to her heart a new possession, in the affection of a beautiful granddaughter who had promised to visit her often. The departed joys of the past had left no such pledge.

XX.

ANOTHER SEARCHER FOR THE TRUTH.

ON the morning after Victory left the Radcliffe plantation to return North, a handsome, olive-complexioned gentleman got off the cars at Nolville and surrendered himself to the guidance of Rush, the Negro boy, who had secured the girl's patronage for the Oakly Hotel a few days before. The new arrival was Robert Lane.

The young man entertained the secret hope that his mother's connection with his father had been legal. It was scarcely probable, he argued, that Rupert Radcliffe, if sufficiently infatuated with Patra Dunbar to present her as his wife to his mother and the public in general, would have ventured so to proclaim an unlawful relation. Robert did not doubt his mother's word, but considered it proper to investigate the validity of the marriage contract his father had repudiated.

Several days devoted to cautious inquiries and a careful review of official records convinced Robert that his mother's story was true, and also that he was himself honestly the child of wedlock. This latter fact was extremely satisfying, in spite of the discovery that the marriage bond had been more

easily set aside because of its violation of Southern sentiments than through his mother's voluntary desertion of her husband's home.

After proving the facts vital to his own content, Robert Lane lingered at Nolville to make investigations along other lines. He wished to see his father and learn something of the Radcliffes, although he had no desire to identify himself with the family. He also found the locality a capital place in which to study the race problem, concerning which he was now more deeply interested than ever. He found his host very communicative, but was slightly puzzled over certain peculiarities of his treatment as a guest, until Rush incidentally revealed the secret one morning when asked for a small service. The lad had replied respectfully enough:

"Yes, sah, d'rectly. I'se boun' to wait on de *white* gentlemen fust."

The answer shocked Robert more than he had supposed the recognition of his caste would affect him. From his birth he had been intimately associated with white people, none of whom had even suspected his racial taint, nor had he revealed it since coming South. He sounded Rush at the first opportunity.

"What did you mean by telling me that you were obliged to serve the white gentlemen first, Rush?"

"Jes' dat, sah. You 'se ain't cl'ar white."

"Why do you think I am not?"

"I'se ain't de judge ob t'ings, sah," replied the boy, humbly. "Mistah Oakly tol' me to tote yo'

grips to *thu'd floor* de day yo'se come. And yo' eat in de li'l' dining-room, sah. Yo' can't fool Mistah Oakly. He spots de darky ebery time, sah."

This ingenious explanation furnished Robert Lane with food for much reflection. He resolved to study those subtle distinctions which so instantly betrayed the presence of the "fatal drop" to his observant host.

The post-office was directly opposite the Oakly Hotel. It interested Robert to watch the throng going in and out of the small building at mail time. He was enjoying the spectacle from the porch of the hotel one morning in company with his talkative host, when an ancient but stoutly constructed coach, drawn by a pair of mules, was brought to a halt in front of the post-office by an aged Negro driver. A dignified elderly gentleman alighted from the coach.

"That's the high-blooded aristocrat I was telling you about just now, Mistah Lane," observed Mr. Oakly. "Yes, sah, that's Colonel Whitmo'. He went through the war and fought at the front of many a battle, and nevah got a scratch or a blistah! He's the stingiest man in the community I'm bound to say, but he's a gentleman from his feet up. Yes, sah! We're proud of the colonel. He keeps us from forgetting what the Old South was like. He's got a big plantation a dozen or mo' miles from town, and works a pack of blacks under a yellah boss. They make the hardest sort of drivers—they yellah breeds. Yes, sah! The one Colonel Whitmo' has drives his niggahs like the Old Nick!"

"But they are not held in bondage? They work for wages and are free to seek other employment, of course?"

"Shuah they work for wages, twelve hours to the day, and live as well as the other cattle and hogs and mules on the plantation; and that's good enough for a niggah, and the only way they earn their keep."

"There can be but one right way to treat men of any color. And that's to treat them fairly and humanely."

"The judges of fairness diffah as to the way of rightness, sah. The right road for the white man is the right way for the niggah, just so fa' and no fa'thah. If the niggah stops short of the polls, the schoolhouse, and the white man's pa'lah, well and good. But let him learn to read and write, stick his nose into politics, or his foot into the white man's pa'lah, and the devil's loose. Yes, sah, the devil's loose, and you can't tole him back into the cotton field with pork and meal no mo'. No, sah, nevah!"

"All of which proves that he has more than brute instincts. It has been fully proven that Negroes may become scholars and able reasoners. You have thousands of educated Negroes in the South, and among them a few illustrious examples. You can not ignore facts."

"We have gots thousands of niggah fools with mo' book learning than common sense; yes, sah, that's a fact. But when it comes to illustrious examples among our full-blooded Negroes, they're sca'ce as hen's teeth; yes, sah!"

"I met a Southern gentleman on the train the other day who spoke very enthusiastically about the progress of the Southern Negro in general, and also in particular instances."

"Was he a white?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, sah. I'll tell you. You have n't got a monopoly of all the white fools up North. We've got a lot of them down here, too; and that's anothah fact fo' you. The high-blooded white stock of the South has got mixed with Yankee blood since the wah, and it's a bad mix-up; yes, sah!"

"But you have direct descendants of famous Southern families, men of prominence and wide influence, who are promoting Negro education."

"So you say, sah. But when you get at the bottom of their arguments you'll find it's industrial education they're talking about, with just enough book learning to make the trades run slick. But even that much is a mistake the South will have to suffah for one of these days. Yes, sah!"

"I do n't agree with you. The wealth, power, and rank of a nation, State, or community is increased by the enlightenment of its people."

"That sort of stuff sounds well in a pulpit and looks fine in print. Even a political stump howlah can put a few patches of it in his speeches and make them fit like frogs in a puddle. Yes, sah! But it do n't take enlightened workmen to raise cotton. It takes niggahs with backbones and fingers and hoes.

And big cotton crops mean wealth and powah and rank fo' the South. Yes, sah!"

Robert Lane found these talks with his host amusing and instructive in a way, but did not care to argue beyond the point upon which he was seeking information. He chose to end the conversation for the time by strolling across the street to where Colonel Whitmore and a florid-faced man of dissipated appearance were conversing. Several bystanders were listening to the talk. As Robert approached Colonel Whitmore was saying, in his smooth, pleasant voice:

"I shall be glad to favor you if I can, Rupert. I'll speak to Dan to-day. If he can spare a mule for a week or two you'll be welcome to the use of it."

"I'll be everlastingly indebted to you, Colonel. I've just got back from a three weeks' hunt down in the swamp. Came home at daybreak and caught my niggers on the windup of a jubilee. Every mother's son of them have let their hoes rust where they dropped them when I rode out of sight, and the weeds are knee high in the corn. But the strings of their banjos are slick enough, and the floor of the big room looks like a circus ring after the show's over and the tent's moved off."

There was a loud guffaw from the bystanders at this bit of humor, in which the florid-faced man joined boisterously, fanning himself with his panama with one gloved hand, while with the other he mopped the bald front of his head with a yellow

silk handkerchief. After a few more pleasantries the man went into the post-office. Robert Lane glanced at him curiously, wondering if there were other Ruperts in the locality, or if this one was his father.

But the young man had crossed the street for a purpose, and there was scant time for meditation. Raising his hat with the easy grace of manner so natural to him, he accosted Colonel Whitmore as he was about to enter his coach:

"Your pardon for my presumption, sir! I believe you are Colonel Whitmore, the owner of a very large cotton plantation in this vicinity. My name is Lane. I am from Illinois. I have never visited a large plantation, but I am anxious to do so. May I have the privilege of visiting yours, sir?"

"In what capacity?" questioned the colonel, looking squarely into the velvety, dark eyes that met his own frankly and steadily. "Are you a Government officer, a politician, a philanthropist, or a—what?"

"I am not a spy nor any of those other creatures, sir," replied Robert, his face lighting up with a smile that always won its way into the hearts of strangers. "I wish to visit your plantation merely as a student in search of a finely illustrated object-lesson."

"And you are not a kodak fiend nor a newspaper reporter?"

"No, sir, nor a book agent, nor a bearer of dangerous weapons or explosives of any kind whatsoever."

"Ah, then you must be a very harmless fellow. If you are at liberty this morning I shall be pleased to carry you with me. I am starting to my plantation at this moment."

"Thank you, sir, thank you! I am honored by your courtesy!" exclaimed Robert, getting into the seat beside his new acquaintance without a moment's hesitation.

The race question was not broached during the pleasant drive. There was no lack of other topics, and probably both men wished to avoid the strain that might result from an early exchange of opinions.

The scenes at the plantation were a revelation to Robert Lane. Only from car windows had he seen Negroes engaged in field labor in any considerable number, and then only on small sections of land. But now he beheld a broad domain, slit with a wooded stream, near which was arrayed a collection of rude and picturesque buildings.

The overseer's office, a large warehouse, a cotton ginnery, a tiny grist-mill, and a supply store, across the counter of which the Negroes bartered their credits for daily necessities, were flanked with various sheds and constituted the central group, around which a large number of low cabins squatted in a semi-circle.

Dan, the overseer, a large, heavy-featured mulatto with piercing eyes and ferocious aspect, bestowed upon Robert a suspicious glance and beckoned Colonel Whitmore into his private office at once. But Buck, at a word from his master, de-

scended from his perch on the coach, tied his mules, and announced himself in readiness to escort the visitor about the premises.

After several hours spent in the review of scenes entirely novel to him, Robert found himself nearing the point from which he had started, but the coach had vanished.

"I s'pect Dan's took de Cun'l ober de creek, sah! Dey's suffin' in de wind ober dar. I s'pect dat fool Ham's been ober to dat schoolhouse ag'in, and fotched back his haid full ob fool notions. Dey's got a darky teachah ober dar wid de learnin' jes' bustin' out ob his mouf."

"Do n't you believe in the education of your race, Uncle Buck?" asked Robert, curiously.

The old man rolled his eyes about half fearfully as if in search of unfriendly listeners, and, evading a direct reply, asked with a hungry gleam in his roving glance:

"What yo' s'pect's gwinter be de bes' fo' de darkies, sah?"

"That is the question that is bothering me, Uncle," replied Robert, remembering that it was scarcely honorable to speak more explicitly in the circumstances, and immediately changing the subject.

Colonel Whitmore soon appeared, explained several things to the young man, and then hastened over to a cabin where two aged Negro women were sitting beside the door watching him with expectant faces. He tossed a package into the lap of each,

and lingered only a moment to pat their brightly-turbaned heads and exchange a few words, for it was getting late and he was anxious to start home.

As the mules moved off at a jog of a trot, Robert Lane glanced back at the scene he was leaving, and his attention was caught by the two old women beside their cabin door delightedly comparing their late gifts, which were small striped sacks of smoking tobacco. The plantation raised its own tobacco, but a package of store goods was a coveted luxury.

"You have favorites, I notice," observed Robert.

"Ah, you refer to those old mammies. They were once my slaves. They returned to me after a short struggle with freedom, and were very faithful during their years of activity. They are my pensioners now. I was the happy bearer of a wonderful piece of news to them a few days ago. A granddaughter of whose existence they had not known has been discovered. I learned of her through the visit of a young Northern lady to one of my friends. By the way, she was from Illinois also."

"From Payson Bend?" asked Robert, unguardedly.

"Yes, from Payson Bend," replied the colonel, with his keen eyes fixed upon the younger man's face. "Miss Victory Radcliffe is her name. Do you know her?"

For a moment the landscape wavered before Robert's eyes, but remembering that the secret of his relation to the Radcliffes was secure with his mother, Miss Lane, and Liberty, he breathed more

freely, and met the watchful eyes squarely as he said frankly :

"I had not intended to speak of my acquaintance with Victory to any one about here, sir. But since her name has come up between us in this manner, I can not well avoid it. I have known her from her birth. She is a remarkably fine girl. I am the adopted son of Hilda Lane, the most intimate associate of the Paysons."

"Ah, I recall your name now. Miss Victory spoke of you in connection with Liberty Despard, who is proven to be the granddaughter of those two old mammies."

"Indeed! I did not imagine I should meet a friend of Victory's, but to stumble upon a clue to Liberty's antecedents as still more astonishing. Has Victory returned North?"

"Yes, she went several days ago. Her grandparents were my playmates in childhood and my friends always. In fact, Dorothy was my sweetheart for a period, but the major cut me out fairly enough. Miss Victory is the counterpart of what her grandmother was in those brave old days."

The colonel sighed and meditated. Robert also reflected, and concluded that Victory had proven her parentage other than she had believed when he had parted with her on the cars at the beginning of her Southern journey. Presently the elder man resumed the conversation.

"But we were speaking of Liberty Despard. I regret that I did not know of your intimate asso-

ciation with her sooner. It would have overjoyed those old mammies to meet you and hear whatever you cared to tell them concerning the girl. I shall take it as a favor if you will permit me to carry you out again."

"And I shall be glad to accept your kindness, sir. I can go to-morrow if it will be agreeable to you."

"Perfectly. I shall be pleased. I feel a double interest in you now. May I ask if you had a particular object in coming South at this time?"

"Yes, sir. I had an important errand, which I have already accomplished. Aside from that I am anxious to study Negro life and character."

"You have a personal interest in the race problem, I surmise," observed the colonel, quietly.

"Yes, sir; reasons I was ignorant of until quite recently," responded Robert, a dull wave of color suffusing his face.

"Well, it is a tremendous problem, indeed. Where is the prophet that can foresee the future or solve our difficulties?"

"Do we need a newer prophet than Him who said near the hour of His translation, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me?'"

"Ah, now I place you, young man!" exclaimed the colonel, turning sidewise in his seat and observing Robert critically. "Well, you have visited the center of my plantation. What do you think of my Negroes?"

"I think them the most repulsive looking Ne-

groes I ever saw. I wondered if you had not made it a point to employ only those lowest in the scale of humanity."

"That is exactly the point I have made," laughed the colonel. "It has been part of my scheme to reject any that could read, write, or reason. You know the adage, 'A little learning is a dangerous thing.' A Negro employed for field labor has no need of comeliness or intellect. You pronounce my gang ugly. How, do you suppose, would your Northern kickers against our Southern sentiments and policies enjoy living up to their 'free and equal' proposition, socially and politically, with my particular herd?"

"Your question is not fairly put, considering the principle involved. You practically impale the whole race question upon my impression of an unusual group. If we are to argue, let it be from the body and not from an isolated group. Even the Anglo-Saxons are heavily weighted with a following so degraded and revolting to the better element as to appall the most charitably disposed."

"My query may appear more unfair at the outset than it will later. Very learned physicians sometimes recoil from admitting the presence of a pestilence in occasional instances, and seek to prove the truth at fault by going through a long process of diagnosis by gradual exclusion of other diseases with similar symptoms, and so are brought at last to accept the once rejected truth. The case does not alter during the interim, but the mind of the physician reaches a state of reconciliation."

"But very learned men have been known to err, and to maintain the error honestly."

"True, 'To err is human.' I have had dealings with all grades of Negroes and have reviewed the race from froth to dregs. Once I declared to my better reason: 'I will not count these creatures less than sun-dyed, ignorant men yet plodding in the deep ruts from which their superiors have arisen to refinement and culture.' But when I had carefully studied the scales of Negro merit through rank and file of living examples, I was convinced that the well-conditioned Negro in the cottonfield is the true composite of the best that animates the race."

"Possibly your natural prejudice inclined you to underrate the value of education to the race."

"Its value is superficial. A Negro may be trained to mimic the superior race in many things—dress, manners, speech. He is receptive to a limited degree, but he has nothing to give but brute strength, and that is despoiled by any process of veneering. He can not be chiseled and polished; he can only be veneered and varnished, and under the shell he remains what his Creator made him, a Negro. Though a hundred times removed from his natural sphere, his innate tendencies survive, repressed perhaps, but never eradicated. 'Truth crushed to earth will rise again.' You must face the fact, sooner or later, that the Negro is not merely a white man browned by harsh exposures. He is black by the design of the All-wise. He is wrought from especial supplies of Nature, and is not the degeneracy of a higher

race. He is a species, a harmony entire, a distinct creation, not wholly of the brute, but a few degrees nearer the 'missing link' than the Anglo-Saxon."

"But he has intellect that responds to culture, soul that awakes to spiritual impulses, aspirations that lift him above the realm of brute creation. These are human endowments. It is profanity to count him one degree less than man!"

"Very well. But there are distinct orders of men. The Negro is last in the scale, which runs: White, yellow, red, brown, black. You would, no doubt, utterly disregard the Negro's fixed position in Nature's color scheme, and seek to bring the two extremes together with the hope of eventually merging these natural antagonists into one body."

"You exaggerate my position, sir. I do not advocate indiscriminate association. But there may be oneness of mind, purpose, organization, endeavor; a system whose arteries pulsate at the throb of one great heart; just dealings at the polls, and in all things that maintain the Negro's rights as an American citizen, to the same extent that his white neighbor of equal qualification is privileged. Our problem should be one of addition of strength and multiplication of power to one end. I advocate the brotherhood of mutual helpfulness; the drawing of human lives into one resistless upward movement toward that One who said, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.'"

"Your advocacy smacks of theology and is pretty in theory, but would scarcely admit of practical

demonstration. Men and fishes may be caught, but it is another thing to hold them. They may swarm into a net, but will mangle each other in their struggles to escape from the detaining web sooner or later. 'Spurious freedom is rather to be chosen than golden fetters,' think the masses."

"But there is a bond that is not captivity, and a web that holds but does not imprison, invoked of God and wrought of brotherly love."

"Theoretically. But as a nation we would be better off without the Negro. His rightful heritage is Africa. Liberia is wooing colonists. The great Soudan, written over with glorious promises, awaits the people that will take possession of its wealth. A few Negroes have ventured forth as colonists and missionaries, but where is the leader that will sound the magical bugle-note and lead the legions of American-born Negroes away from the scenes of their former captivity to the land of their rightful inheritance? There is none such. As an individual or a race, the Negro lacks the courage and independence that makes the white man his superior in all things. He would rather be a servant in the white man's land than to seek and control a republic of his own elsewhere. We can not drive him away. We would not enslave him again if we could. We repudiate the thought of amalgamation. What then? In 1800 we had one million Negroes. Now, early in the twentieth century, we have ten millions. What shall we do with them?"

"Yes, every eighth member of Uncle Sam's fam-

ily is a Negro. It has been estimated that, in the Black Belt, only ten per cent of them are intelligent, and that nine per cent of the greater bulk are thoroughly vicious. The outlook is indeed appalling. There is but one righteous way to alleviate the difficulty and lessen increasing embarrassment. You should deal with the Negro as an unfortunate younger brother whose manifold shortcomings commend him to your tenderest solicitude. The Anglo-Saxon of to-day is the child of centuries of Christian enlightenment, while the American Negro links his scant twoscore years of freedom to three centuries of slavery, and that era to countless ages of barbarism. His bondage in your land was his initiation into the portals of civilization. It was the gray glimmer of dawn, and his period of freedom has been but the rose-tinted herald of approaching day. You can not separate his past from the maze of darkness and evil that shrouds it. The color of his skin, his rugged features, and his mental crudeness are his written history. But you can change his condition, arouse his dormant faculties, unveil his mind, inspire his soul, and multiply his usefulness to your nation and to the world. You have said that he receives, but does not give. Let that pass; it is not proven. But he is a reflective body, and it goes without saying, *he must reflect that which he receives*, and it behooves you to have a care as to the quality and quantity of your gift to him."

"We reason from different standpoints. You from theories drawn from files of literature—senti-

ments and figures. I deal with living, convincing facts. You have optimistic views. I have pessimistic assurance. But let us—"

At this juncture a horseman overtook the coach and engaged Colonel Whitmore in a conversation that lasted till Buck drew up in front of his master's home. The horseman rode on, and Colonel Whitmore said, with a wave of his hand in the direction of his dilapidated residence:

"Behold my castle, young man! If you will accept such hospitality as I can offer, I shall be pleased to keep you over night and continue our argument at our leisure."

"And I shall be delighted to remain with you, sir," replied Robert. But as he stepped upon the decaying floor of the porch a remembrance smote upon him like a flash, and he halted outside the door.

"Come in! Welcome to my castle!" exclaimed the colonel, leading the way and turning to face his guest.

"I beg your pardon, sir. For the moment I had forgotten that I was not entitled to your courtesy. I find it difficult to adjust myself to the position among men assigned me by accident of birth. But I have only recently discovered that a tinge of black flows in my veins and colors my future. I will walk on to Nolville, but I am deeply sensible of your kindness to me, a stranger. I thank you, sir."

A spark seemed to flash from Colonel Whitmore's eyes as he pierced the somber twilight to

fathom the gleanings depths of the younger man's eyes, and he quickly held out his hand, saying:

"Ah, you might have been a stranger this morning, but it is evening now. Right well *you* reflect the white man's honesty and courage. You have been gently reared. Come in, my friend, come in and share with me the shadows and the cheer of this night. You are sore-hearted from a hurt that has no cure. Well, so it is sometimes Fate steals upon us unawares and robs us of our treasures. Be at ease. I have not lived amidst color facts in vain. I was not deceived. I sought to prove how far you were 'lifted up' toward your example. I am satisfied. Friendship, too, steals upon us unawares sometimes, and makes us kindred, spite of Fate. Compensation drops us a crumb; let us not despise it. But enough of that. Come in, my young friend, come in!"

"I thank you, sir," murmured Robert Lane, huskily, as he permitted himself to be drawn across the threshold.

XXI

A LATE CALLER.

THE apartment into which Colonel Whitmore ushered his guest was a low-ceiled room, beamed and wainscoted with cypress wood darkened by time. The floor was bare and the windows were curtainless. The furniture consisted of several well-filled bookcases, a desk, a few leather chairs, and a reading table littered with newspapers and reviews and supplied with a student lamp. A few heavily-framed engravings hung on the walls, and a tall wooden clock, flanked on one side by an iron statuette of General Washington and on the other by a bronze bust of General Lee, occupied the carved mantel.

Ruin had long run riot in the once pretentious mansion, and only three rooms were now habitable—the library, the colonel's bedroom which opened out of it, and one other room which served as kitchen and dining-room.

The simple meal was soon served, and Chloe, the stout old housekeeper, after completing her tasks for the day, appeared at the door in company with Buck, to bid the colonel and his guest good-night.

"Buck," said the colonel, detainingly, "you and

Chloe get your books from your cabin and show Mr. Lane how smart you are."

"Yes, sah; dat 's what we 'll sho'ly do!" declared the man, exchanging delighted glances with his wife.

The pair soon returned and, sitting down beside the table with radiant faces, happily labored through a review of their hardly acquired accomplishments. But to Robert the sight of those two gray-headed Negroes, responding like children to the colonel's indulgent efforts to show them off, was a pathetic scene that told its own story of long-delayed hopes and blighted buds of promise heroically struggling into feeble growth too late for blossom or fruitage.

"You see Buck does n't intend to be disfranchised," explained Colonel Whitmore, with a curious tremor in his voice. "He can read and write."

"Yes, sah," added Buck, proudly, "an' me an' Chloe 's got more 'n three hundred dollahs put away safe and sound. I'se dun voted eber since de wah, an' I'se bound to keep a-goin'!"

Robert duly complimented the industrious couple, and encouraged them to continue their efforts. They had scarcely departed for their cabin when a voice called aloud from the darkness without:

"Ho, there, Colonel! What about that mule?"

"Hello, there, Rupert! 'Light and come in!" responded the colonel, cordially. "I have a friend spending the night with me. Come in and welcome him to the Sunny South."

Rupert Radcliffe had ridden his horse up to the very portals of the house. He dismounted, and, tying

the animal to one of the sagging posts of the porch, stepped into the house, removing his hat and dogskin gloves as he went. The mellow lamplight softened the boldness of his physique somewhat, but his presence was hateful to Robert, who could scarcely conceal his aversion when he rose for presentation; but the keen edge of his revolt was dulled when his palm came into contact with that of his parent, and he felt the warm, close pressure of a hand strong and firm, but padded with flesh as smooth and satiny as that of a delicate lady. It was the hand of a fastidious gentleman attached to the arm of a man whose whole physique was coarse and dissipated.

"Ho, a Northerner come South to inspect the heathen, I'll be bound! But which breed, the white or black?"

"My principal reason for coming South was of a personal nature, sir. But I am particularly interested in your Negroes."

"No doubt; most Northerners are. Well, you are welcome down in Dixie. We'd rather have you come as friends, but our latchstrings are always out and our corn pones are never too small to divide with friend or foe."

"Do you consider Northerners your foemen, sir?"

"Ho, I've a mind to think they are, yes! Not because they thrashed us once in open-handed fight—tore down our ensigns, exploded our fine experiment at State sovereignty, ripped up our Confederacy, slaughtered our army, desolated our homes, and

blasted our fortunes—but because, in spite of Appomattox, your Northern autocrats maintain an attitude of suspicion. They keep their noses near our kitchens, their ears at the keyholes of our counsel rooms, their critical eyes upon our domestic concerns, and their hands upon the throttle of our public affairs. In fact, you Yankees never let us forget that we were once your prisoners of war. You read the Constitution to us by line and expound your theory of its meaning, expecting us to accept it and shout amen at every clause.”

“There is a right way to read the written law, be it the Constitution, the ancient law that underlies it, or the simple proposition of the Golden Rule which all men laud.”

“Ho, ‘it’s a poor rule that won’t work both ways.’ Were we to denounce some of your Northern practices, invade your soot holes, pits, and sweatshops where women, children, and disabled men labor, groan, and die in the unequal battle of weakness against starvation, disease, and oppression, you would bid us return to our own concerns. And were we to smite your capitalists, and lure or force your toilers into the specious freedom of idleness, a lawless mob, the prey of every evil, how would you like it?”

“The means may justify the end sometimes.”

“Ho, suppose your upper tens were without fortune or credit and were struggling in the mire with the mob, and at every attempt to reach solid ground were reminded that ‘all men being equal’ no one

might possess the uplands unless he could lift the whole mob to a like position? You'd howl, wouldn't you? Our niggers were our property once, controlled, happy, and worth their keep; but now they are our biggest burden. You'd keep us yoked with the black man, chained ankle to ankle. That's equality, you say, according to the Constitution. 'And so, Mister Southman, whithersoever thou goest take the Negro with you!'

"You speak in riddles and wildly exaggerate Northern sentiments. You are bitter and unreasonable, sir!"

"Ho, you did n't sugarcoat the pills you made us swallow in the sixties! We're salivated yet. Well, we've got our burden to tote sure as fate, but we'd feel kinder toward you Northerners if you'd make less hue and cry over our way of handling our load. It's easier to carry a load on your back than drag it along with your ankles. Try it and see. But we've dared to lift our heads now. We're getting out of the rut and breaking the yokes and ankle chains that have held us down in the mire with our free niggers. Ho, we'll carry our load on our backs now like men of muscle. We'll walk where we've crept, and, by jinks, we'll run when we can!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Coloned Whitmore. "And let the load slip from our backs? Ha, ha! What then?"

"Ho, let the nigger light on his feet and give chase. Live and let live! White man first, black man next, and the fiends take the hindmost! That's the

new era of equality, fraternity, freedom, and liberty! That's the spirit we've caught from the North. It's the *strenuous* method of living and hustling. The Yankees used to kneel to say their prayers, I've heard, and now they say them on the dead run. But they would have us bite the dust with the niggers in our devotions. Ho, Mister Northerner!"

"I have not been taught such theories, sir. All men may walk uprightly, carry their burdens as best they can with due regard for others, and live at peace. But there is only one attitude of prayer for men in any clime or condition acceptable to God. And that is the invisible attitude of the 'humble and contrite heart.' "

"Well, we won't quarrel over our prayers at any rate. I do n't waste any energy along that line. But I believe in the old proverb, 'God helps them that help themselves.' "

"Ha, ha! so do our darkies, Rupert," interposed the colonel. "They make that creed the law and gospel of their lives."

"So they do. They interpret it to suit themselves and appropriate its benefits. It's a game of touch and take. That's freedom! They argue that the world, the South in particular, owes them a living for all time. That's liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Well, we're growing wiser. We've had a big meal of universal suffrage and foundered on it. We're trying the thirteenth and fifteenth amendments by another rule. Have you read our new rendition of the law, Mr. Northerner?"

"Yes. I have no fault to find with the wording of your new provisions respecting suffrage, sir, since they apply to black and white alike. But I hope the spirit of the action was worthy of such means to secure the good of all concerned. I believe it so to be."

"Good! but your Northern newspapers rail at the hint of integrity in Southern policies. You are not well instructed."

"There are falsifiers of every creed and traitors to every law, you know, sir. Some of our papers are rabid, no doubt; but as a rule our people are generous and wish to be just. But your own press is skeptical of Northern sentiments, and imputes to us unmerited harshness of opinion and judgment. There should be more faith between us and less of doubt and unkind criticism. We are one family, one nation; we have but one flag, one God, and should be at peace."

"Ho, and at our lessons! Well, North and South are friendly enemies at worst, and need no go-between. We'll meet and wrestle when we please, and speak our minds to one another, and now and then concede each other homage. But for our common good, why, then we're one; and the fiends take the foreigner that spits at either. Ho, let us be friends, Mr. Northerner! We've had our bluster. It takes two hands to make a shake. Here's one for the South!"

Rupert Radcliffe's jovial breeziness of voice and manner was irresistible. Impelled by the impulses

of patriotism and generosity, Robert rose quickly and laid his hand into that of his father. A puzzled expression swept over the older man's countenance as he contemplated the young Northerner's face.

"You remind me of some one I have known, Mr. Lane. Is this your first visit to the South?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ho, a chance resemblance then. Well, Colonel, I'll have to mosey home now. What about that mule?"

"The mule is at your service if you'll fetch it from the plantation. But stay awhile, Rupert. Let my young friend's nerves tingle with the weird musical story of our past, as you so well know how to improvise it," said Colonel Whitmore, drawing a black case from beneath his desk and lifting out of it a rare old violin.

"Ho, you know my lame foot, Colonel, don't you?" exclaimed Rupert Radcliffe, a smile of pleasure lighting up his face and changing its whole character. Carefully rubbing his hands with his yellow silk handkerchief, he took up the instrument as if a sacred treasure had been committed to his care.

During the next hour Robert Lane realized that within his father's gross hulk of flesh the exquisite soul of music held its sway. Faintly a dreamy reverie stole upon the air like an echo of days long gone, and gradually glided into a medley of old plantation melodies, which were succeeded by a reflective passage, the real prelude of what was to follow. For then, in low, chanting tones, the artist began to ac-

company the music, so skillfully wrought from string and bow, with a word interpretation of the varying changes in the wonderful fantasia. So perfectly did the rhythmical undertones explain and enhance the thrilling strains of music, whether meditative, stately, brilliant, tragic, jubilant, despairing, hauntingly sad, or plaintively sweet, that nothing was left to be imagined or desired.

It began in halls, magnificent with pomp and wealth, amid scenes where beauty and chivalry and brilliancy allured the mind and senses, but stupified the soul. Then the music glided into labor's hum, and various hints of industry and traffic were mingled with raileries, barterings, pleas of weariness, harsh commands, cries for mercy, growls of stubbornness, the cutting lash, and scream of agony. But fierceness and despair were broken soon, with witless jests, snatches of song, sullen complaints, and secret sighs of sympathy, till all sounds blent or sank into the common din of labor's hum and hum, hum, hum.

And then from things discordant the scene changed to cheerfulness. Blue skies overarched merry birds on wing, fragrance of bloom, and shimmering fields of growing crops, where contented toilers swung bright-bladed hoes between long rows of corn and cotton, whistling, singing, or calling to each other through busy, sunny hours. And then night slowly crept up from the east, and the flaming sun rolled down the west. Twilight prevailed, and homeward trod the dusky throng of laborers—age

laggingly, prime leisurely, youth boisterously, childhood fretfully, and all wearily. Cabins were invaded, simple food divided, confidences exchanged, prospects reviewed. Idle gibes, vacant laughter, mockeries, complaints, and bickerings subsided. The wails of hungry picaninnies satisfied ceased, and crooning mothers nodded. Sounds of day died out, and flippancies and miseries, emotions, all grew faint. Sleep stole into the cabins, kissed each dusky eyelid, and brooded through the quiet night. One by one the constant stars grew brighter in the high dome of hovering skies, and silence reigned in the cottonfields.

Again the scene was changed. It was Sabbath morning, the time for semi-idleness and gossip. Joys and woes measured their gains; love-making prospered; banjos were in evidence; picaninnies danced and shrieked in glee. But later on a sound grew and deepened, attained solemnity, and vibrated with the travesty of crude exhortations and painful prayer. Wails, groans, howls, and wild implorings for deliverance from bondage long endured challenged the Invisible. Vows of faith, contrite confessions of sins, longings, passionate appeals and promises leaped from untutored lips to ease distracted hearts, till overwrought emotions broke in tears and softer moods relieved the strain with whisperings of better days.

And then dire mutterings confused the scene. A bugle-note marshaled opposing hosts to battle. Frenzied armies met, reveled in blood, and met

again, and oft again recoiled, re-enforced, and met again, O pity of it! And always there were shrieks of torture, dying moans and prayers, and hush of death, added to ghastly tragedies of gun and sword and deadly hate.

But suddenly a thrilling note chastened the lurid atmosphere. Triumphant music conquered the din, and over the crimson-stained hills Freedom came singing along, the harbinger of Peace. The furious clamor died away to distant echoes, but Sorrow trailed her somber robes through paths of desolation and wept in bitterness of spirit. Regretful Memory lingered on desecrated fields and haunted silent hills where camped the slaughtered sons of North and South.

Again night stole from the east. The glorious sun rolled into the western sea, and twilight flung her veil of gauzy gray between the fleeting light of day and darksome shades of night. Sad Revery bared her heart to wooing pains, and wrung her ghostly hands in voiceless grief. The constant stars gleamed from their high estate as in those olden days, and silence reigned in the cottonfields of broad plantations. An owl hooted where the big house had stood, a mateless dove mourned in the jasmine bush by the well, and down the lover's lane a whip-poor-will gave forth his plaintive note. The west wind came sobbing over the fallow cornfield, swung open the sagging doors of empty cabins, and bent within to whisper sad tales of wretched black forms astray from sheltering roof, flitting hither and thither

for food, raiment, peace ; strangely forlorn and hopeless in their new paradise of Freedom.

And then a heavy mist ascended from the moaning river at the west, floated inland, obscured the old plantation from the watchful stars, smothered the sighing night-breeze, spangled the shuddering pine-trees, baptized the whispering grasses, and moistened the parching earth with cooling pledge of larger gifts. And then all things quivered and slept.

Never in his life had the emotions of Robert Lane been so thrilled and charmed, so pained and raptured. And aside from the effect of the weird fantasia he had felt the magnetism of the man, whose eyes had scarcely wandered from his own during the performance.

When the last wavering tone had ceased the sound of convulsive sobs outside the window nearest the player attracted his attention.

"Ho, Buck, you rascal!" he exclaimed. "Cut that racket short! I'll play your favorite." Almost instantly the room was filled with the lively strains of a Negro melody that drew expressions of delight from the old couple, who were thus encouraged to show their tear-wet faces above the window sill.

After this indulgence the artist gave his attention to the strings of his instrument for a few moments, and then, drawing his bow across them with a peculiarly effective action, swept into the grandeur of a selection from the compositions of an old master. It was the climax of the musician's perform-

ances, and observing the entrancement of his listeners he improvised a fantastic refrain, which finally melted into the atmosphere like an uncertain whisper.

"Ho, I 'll mosey home now, Colonel!" announced the player, suddenly loosening the strings of the violin and laying it on the table.

The colonel started, and Robert, too, blinked half-dazedly as the remarkable violinist hastily drew on his gloves, stepped to the door and, with a farewell wave of his hand, flung on his hat and disappeared in the darkness without.

"I always forgive Rupert Radcliffe's shortcomings when he plays like that. He is truly a master of the fiddle and the bow," commented the colonel, presently.

"I would never have suspected him of such talent. It is a marvelous gift," responded Robert Lane, leaning toward the window and listening to the thudding hoof-beats of the animal that was swiftly bearing the late caller away from the memory beleaguered ruins of Colonel Whitmore's castle.

XXII.

THE KERNEL OF THE NUT.

WHEN Robert Lane awakened from his night's sleep on the cot Colonel Whitmore had prepared for him in the library, it was to find the new day dawning through lowering clouds. Before the morning meal was over the rain was falling heavily.

"Come," said Colonel Whitmore, rising from the breakfast table and leading the way to an unused room, through the ceiling of which the rain was pouring in numerous places, "I will show you the passage to my little vale of rest."

He paused beside a sashless window, and Robert saw a strip of greensward stretched like a ribbon between two long rows of weeping willows, whose storm-driven strands reached to the ground and swept to and fro with the swishing sound of sea billows. For awhile the pair stood silently watching the willows writhe under the lashing torrents. The deeply indented pathway through the middle of the greensward had become a miniature river, into which sheets of water drained from either side. Presently Robert asked:

"Is that a hedge at yonder end of the passage?"

"No, it is a Rose of Sharon; but it hides the

opening into a myrtle-hedged inclosure, within which is my vale of rest. The dust of several generations of Whitmores lies there, and along the east edge a row of numbered hillocks marks where the elements reclaimed a portion of our colored folk. I sometimes find myself wishing that all of those who went out from my care on Freedom's day were lying along that east hedge in my little vale. They would be better off, I fancy, and I would be richer in content."

There was a lull in the swirl of flinging branches. The tempest of wind and rain had suddenly ceased, but the sky was still leaden, and the willows kept wringing their dripping strands to a soft lullaby of running waters.

"Why along the east edge?" asked Robert, meditatively.

"We bury men with their feet to the east, do we not?"

"Yes, sir. I see—and their servants at their feet."

Colonel Whitmore nodded assent, and turning about led the way to the library. He took a parchment roll from his desk and spread it out on the table. It was the plan of the cemetery.

"Here is the numbered row along the east edge," he explained. "The last six in the row are the graves of former slaves of my own, who asked for the privilege of burial in the row after their freedom. The last was an old man who came many miles to die on the plantation, so that he might be buried under the myrtle hedge close to the family he once

served. Chloe made him comfortable in one of my unused rooms. I asked him what I could do to increase his comfort or happiness, and he caught my hands and kissed them because of the welcome I had given him, which was poor enough, God knows. 'T'se jes' wanter rest, Massa,' he said. 'T'se jes' wanter lay dar inside de hedge so de heabenly angels 'll know I b'longs to de Whitmo's, an' so ol' Massa 'll take care ob me in de Glorylan'. Well, we laid him in the row. I dug the grave myself."

"That was a kind act, Colonel Whitmore. My Master said, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.' That is the watchword of Aunt Hilda's life. How often she has reminded me that a kindly deed always lifts up more than one."

"Just before the old darky died I sat down beside his bed and took his hand. 'What can I do for you, Uncle Rube?' I asked. 'Jes' ask de heabenly angels to tell ol' Massa Whitmo' dat I'll be dar at de big golden gate in de mawnin',' he replied. I sat there dumb as an ox. 'Pray, Mars' Ralph,' he pleaded. I motioned to Buck, who dropped to his knees and prayed as became a simple child of faith. And that is why I dug old Rube's grave. I had exchanged tasks with Buck, and would not be defrauded of my chosen part. But enough of that. We shall be obliged to give up our trip to the plantation to-day. How shall we pass the time?"

"I think I ought to return to Nolville, sir. I do not wish to trespass upon your time."

"I wish you to remain with me to-day. I am wholly at your service at present."

"Thank you, sir. I would like above all else to hear more of your experiences with the Negroes. I intend to devote my life to their betterment."

"You will find the cause an unprofitable investment for your energy and ability, young man."

"I believe I shall receive my reward as I go along."

"That remains to be proven. You have said that you but recently discovered your connection with the race. Did the knowledge cause you to waver from a previously chosen career?"

"I aspired to the ministry of the Gospel, sir; but I shall be content to labor in any capacity that will most surely benefit my people."

"You would like to hear something of my experiences. Well, I have been working a scheme for years and have had numerous experiences. People call me a skinflint. Well, there is a law of compensation. At the outbreak of the Rebellion my credit was good for half a million. While we were yet confident of sustaining the Confederacy I borrowed a large sum on my slaves to help the cause. At the close of the war my fortune was gone; my home was in ruins; my wife, shattered by the disasters of the conflict, died in my arms an hour after my return from the battlefields. Enough of that.

"The second year brought a few of my old slaves back to me, glad to work for moderate wages. But the general run of free Negroes were demoralized

and full of self-importance. They considered the planter obligated to them and barely made a show of work, dragging the crops through half cultivated, with scant profit to the planter. They were restless, and, anxious to make the most of their freedom, devoted their evenings to gatherings of various kinds, carousing away the hours needed for sleep. They were resentful of supervision, and irritable if urged to honest effort. I became disgusted with the swagger of the too free and easy nigger. I faced the situation squarely, and argued that the law which had put me into the bondage of debt, through the freeing of my slaves, should give me freedom through the bondage of Negroes. For twenty years I have worked on that principle. I consider it a law of compensation."

"Is it identical with peonage, sir?"

"It is commonly classified under that name. Northerners call it involuntary slavery under a new name. But I sought a means to a worthy end, and believed that I was justified in undertaking to extricate myself from debt through the frailties and credulity of the race through which my misfortune came. Do you understand my premise?"

"I think I do."

"But while I have used politic measures with advantages on my side, I have not worked my scheme revengefully. I had rebelled against paying for service that fell short of the contract entered upon, but I was willing to pay, and have paid, a living price for labor actually received. No man can do

more than a day's work in a given time, but the average Negro will manage to do less than his best, and expects full pay. He works from sheer necessity, not from choice. If you quibble or refuse to pay for shortage, he considers himself unfairly treated, abused, defrauded. Enough of that. A man who fails to profit by his experiences is a fool.

"I discovered that there was more profit in one well cultivated acre, all things considered, than in four poorly tilled. I cut down on my acreage, and, instead of hiring the shiftless class that demanded much for little, began to pick my labor, search for it in fact, as a shrewd man hunts for an investment that is likely to yield a moderate dividend at least.

"I had found that the Negro with ideas of independence in his head was a losing investment in a cotton row, and that the Negro who chose to labor in my particular field, *as the lesser of two evils*, was the one I wanted. But I found it wise to discriminate even in that class. I therefore framed a set of requirements, from which I have not deviated except in one instance—the case of my present overseer, a mulatto. I will explain my reason for wavering in his favor later.

"I demanded the able-bodied Negro, born in slavery of a field wench. He must come to me directly from the hands of so-called civil authority, having completed a term in a chain-gang, being one for whom new charges were waiting execution. He must be unable to read, write, or play on the banjo or other like instrument. He must be innocent of the

value of the ballot-box, of political desires, religious fervors, and intellectual aspirations. In short, I demanded one devoid of ambition to rise above his natural condition.

"I favored Dan, in spite of his being a half-breed, simply because of the discovery that he was born on my own plantation. He was a child in arms when freedom was declared. His mother had wandered farther South, and continued to be a field laborer through lack of ability to better herself. Her child matured in very adverse surroundings, and developed into a criminal. But she had the affection for her offspring, common to mothers, and while he was serving a term in the chain-gang some hundred and fifty miles south of here, she learned in a round-about way that I was employing convict labor, and walked the entire distance up here to beg me to secure him from the authorities upon his release, before his conviction upon another charge which was pending. I felt bound to give the fellow a trial. I bought his second term of chain-gang labor, and have never regretted it."

"And the old mother, sir?" said Robert Lane, anxiously.

"Ah, the old mother lived contentedly in a cabin with Dan on the plantation for five years. She is sleeping under the myrtle hedge in my little vale of rest."

"Thank you, sir, and pardon my interruption," said Robert, feelingly.

"Certainly. You now comprehend why my Ne-

groes are so remarkably uncouth. They are a carefully selected group. They are of the earth, earthy. Under control as I have them, they represent the Negro at his highest value. He is the natural Adam of the soil, created to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.

"I am a rigid master. One offense is a grave matter, but the second means discharge with undesirable consequences. Having worked out their fines, my lot are now bound to my service by voluntary contract. They work so many hours per day for certain wages, and agree to remain on the plantation day and night unless leave of absence is given them by proper authority. Furthermore, the contracts are so worded that they may be closed at the option of either the first or second party with certain provisions, or without provisions, if I choose to waive them."

"May I ask what the provisions are, sir?"

"Ah, now we are getting down to the kernel of the nut, young man. The provision is this: If through offense I have occasion to discharge an individual, I am to return him to the authorities from whose hands I received him. If on the other hand an individual desires to break the contract during the year, or at the expiration of the yearly contract, *I am to return him to the authorities from whose hands I received him.* Do you see?"

"Yes, sir, perfectly. I am reminded of the old saw: 'A nought's a nought, and a figger's a figger. All for the white man, and nothing for the nigger!'"

"Precisely. But if we mutually agree to sever our relations, I may waive the provision and secure the individual's signature to a promise that he will leave the vicinity and never return, or seek to communicate with any of my employees, without my permission."

"But what dominant power holds these men to their contracts?"

"Fear coupled with ignorance. They regard a formal document to which they have set their mark a powerful instrument of the law. A term in a chain-gang is not quickly forgotten, and such convicts are usually conscious of transgressions beyond the one expiated. In some localities it often—I might say generally—occurs that a convict is released from one term of service only to confront another charge, which being presented in writing is all that is necessary to convince the illiterate Negro of the impossibility of escaping the full penalty of his crimes, even though he is innocent of the particular one imputed to him. He therefore comes from the chain-gang disciplined, and with the belief that the law, having got a grip upon him, is not likely to let go till fully appeased.

"There is a form of peonage scarcely preferable to chain-gang labor. But in the case of my Negroes, I do not consider that I am defrauding them of anything to which they are entitled. Free from restraint, and the fear of a worse form of servitude, they would be a lazy, lawless horde, a curse to themselves, and a menace to the welfare of others. On

my plantation they have the necessities of life, are practically free from dangerous temptations, are promoting prosperity, and by the terms of a special compact are learning responsibility and accountability as individuals and as members of a body."

"Is the special compact a written bond?"

"Yes. It is a contract between me and themselves as a *body intact*. It is separate and distinct from their yearly contracts as individuals. Ten years ago I found myself in command of a force of governable Negroes, and was anxious to retain them for a term of years. For several years my crops had been exceedingly profitable, and I had largely decreased my debt. I concluded to add to my acreage if I could get additional labor of the sort I wanted. But there was some risk in bringing in a number of new hands at one time. I devised a new scheme and explained it to the gang.

"I proposed drawing up a contract for them to sign as a body, with a provision that the failure of one individual to keep the terms of the agreement would release me from my obligation and render the contract void."

"Am I to understand that the contract was bona fide on your part, sir?"

"Certainly, young man. 'The devil is seldom as black as painted!' But enough of that. By the terms of the instrument the body was to continue in my service exactly in accordance with their yearly contracts, but positively without the failure of a single signer to fulfill his part for a period of five

years, except in case of *death on the grounds*. In accordance with the terms of the guaranty I agreed to pay over to the body one-third of the profits of the crop of the fifth season. This over and above their regular wages.

"I gave the gang a week to consider the matter, and again met them in council. Their chosen speaker made what appeared to me a very singular request. He asked that I discharge my white overseer and four guards. The gang proposed to accept my proposition upon that ground. By investigation I found that the surveillance of my guards was hateful to the Negroes, who proposed taking the responsibility of the new contract into their own hands by constituting each member of the body a watch over his fellows, choosing one of their number as overseer, who was to act under my personal supervision.

"I was taken aback at this crude attempt at dictation, but finally arranged a compromise. I discharged the guards and permitted the gang to select an assistant overseer, who was to act under and with the white director, and in conjunction with the white manager of the general supply store of the settlement. I was uneasy for a time, but without grounds.

"I secured extra laborers and increased my acreage of cotton. The new members signed the contract quite willingly, and every signer immediately became suspicious and watchful of his fellows. 'Set a thief to watch a thief,' you know.

"Everything moved along prosperously until the fifth crop of cotton was in bloom. The whole gang

was enthused with the prospect of the largest crop of cotton we had ever picked. Something like pride shone in every ugly face, and made it appear less stupid and brutal. Jack, the great burly Negro chosen as assistant overseer, was particularly jubilant, and was constantly curbing slothful tendencies of several of the gang with reminders of the splendid outlook for the *nigger share* of the profits."

"But what happened when the fifth crop was in bloom, sir?"

"Ah, I would like to omit that; but it demonstrates the laws of nature, besides being of value to the student of Negro development.

"When the cotton was in bloom that year the mother of Dan, my present overseer, lay dying in her cabin, and asked me to bring a white minister to pray for her. In her youth she had been impressed with the religious counsels of my mother. I succeeded in getting a minister from Nolville. He prayed with the old sinner to her satisfaction, and then I took him home. He knew that visitors were not wanted at the plantation unless invited, but in recounting his experience at the bedside of the dying negress, in the bosom of his family during the presence of a woman of strong missionary proclivities, he failed to make that point sufficiently plain, I suppose. At any rate, without disclosing her intention, the woman procured a horse and buggy the next day, filled a basket with dainties, and drove out to the plantation to minister to the negress. She was tying her horse under a clump of trees when Jack

discovered her, and speedily informed her that visitors were not allowed on the premises. But the woman resented his interference, and yielding to a swift and beastly passion Jack attacked her. Hearing smothered screams, the white director and old Dinah ran to the rescue. Frantic with fright and seriously injured, the woman got into her buggy and succeeded in reaching home and telling her wretched story before utterly collapsing. Of course, Nolville was instantly aroused, and a mob of infuriated white men lost no time in starting for the plantation.

"In the meantime the story had swept over the plantation. The Negroes left their work and hurried to the settlement, realizing what Jack's fate would be sooner or later. The fellow had taken refuge in the timber back of the buildings, and some of the Negroes suggested assisting him to fly, others favored hiding him and defying the mob that would surely be oncoming. Another declared that resistance was useless, as Jack would surely be caught and executed without mercy.

"It was Dan who suddenly remembered the special contract and its terms. With his longing eyes fixed on the cotton-fields that lay shimmering in the afternoon sunshine like a foam-flecked sea of green, he muttered: 'Jack's bound to die anyhow. If he dies on the plantation the contract will hold good.'

"The words were caught up and repeated. A portentous calm fell upon the Negroes as they too, one by one, turned their eyes toward the beautiful prospect. Then they looked at each other, furtively

at first, boldly at last, with gleaming eyes and licking tongues. There were low growls and mutterings, and a simultaneous movement toward the timber where Jack had hidden. God! enough of that!

"When the mob from Nolville reached the plantation at sundown, the settlement was illumined with a bonfire, and suspended from the great crane projecting from the gable of the warehouse the limp body of poor Jack was swinging to and fro like a pendulum."

"Did the contract hold good, sir?" asked Robert, quickly, wishing to forget the picture his fancy had conjured up.

"Yes. Jack *died on the grounds*. That was the saving clause. I was away from home on the day of the tragedy, but returned next morning. Buck met me and told the story with chattering teeth. I drove out to the plantation at once. It was noon when I reached the settlement. There was a ridge of freshly turned earth in the edge of the timber. The white director was whistling in the doorway of his office. The Negroes were about their usual occupations. And Dan, newly elected assistant overseer in Jack's place, was riding about the premises on the sleek black mule poor Jack had ridden every day for five years.

"Things moved on smoothly after that, and a fine yield of cotton was safely harvested. But I found myself in a critical position. Benson, the white man in charge of the supply store, a trustworthy fellow, discovered that many of the Negroes

intended to ask me to release them from further service, and to waive the provisions of the yearly contracts on the ground of good behavior and honest labor. I knew that three or four more fair crops would put me out of debt. But if my well-disciplined force left me in a body, as I feared, if a few set the example I should be left in the lurch. Of course, I could have refused to waive the provision, and so made reasonably sure of retaining the majority of the gang, but they would have felt aggrieved and resentful. The cotton was nearly all marketed, and I saw that I must act quickly to forestall the request for release.

"Counting upon Dan's affection for me, I devised a new scheme and impressed him with its importance to me and the benefits it would secure to the gang. Furthermore, I promised him a hundred dollars bonus if he would guarantee to push the scheme through. He readily consented to undertake the task.

"I presented two plans to the gang, allowing them to choose for themselves. The first was to pay into their hands at once the share of the year's profits due them, holding them to the provision of their expiring contracts. The second was to reserve the sum due them, retain them in service, and give them the entire profits of the fifth crop raised thereafter, and with it the unprovisional release of their contracts. I counted upon having paid off my indebtedness by that time.

"The youngest member of the gang was nearly forty. All had grown accustomed to labor and discipline. They had not been unfairly treated on the plantation, and most of them were without friends or knowledge of the whereabouts of their kindred. Dan used his influence to advantage, and slight objections were gradually overcome. The second proposition was finally seriously considered, fully explained, and duly accepted.

"This is the fifth year since that last contract was made. I paid off the remainder of my debts last year, with scant margin for my necessary personal expenses. This year's crop belongs to my gang. They have worked like slaves this season, and have every reason to expect an enormous harvest, and when it is marketed and the profits distributed among my laborers I shall release them from every provision and let them go. I shall have canceled my last obligation then, and I, too, shall be free from bondage at last, penniless till I can sell some of my land or raise another harvest, but relieved beyond words. But enough of that."

"Are things moving along harmoniously now?"

"Yes, with the exception of a ripple of uneasiness caused by the misbehavior of Ham, a thick-necked, heavy-browed buck who has grown restless here lately. Dan says a strange Negro has been hanging about the border of the plantation for eight or ten days, and last Sabbath Ham was missing all day. He turned up in the evening, however, and confessed that he had been over at a small country

schoolhouse, some miles distant, to attend a meeting of colored folk, and professed to be highly delighted with his venture. The whole gang was incensed at his action, which trespassed upon his yearly contract. They feared he would commit a second offense, which would bring about his discharge and overthrow the special contract, now so near its maturity. Dan says they have told Ham openly, that in case of a second offense they will make good the terms of the contract by sacrificing him as they did Jack. But the scamp meets even these dark threats stolidly, and pretends to have become very wise at the meeting. I induced him to tell me the whole story, from the incident of his first temptation to play truant to the height and breadth of the wisdom he had gained.

"He said that a colored preacher had approached him in the cotton-field one day, urged him to attend the Sunday meetings at the schoolhouse, and declared that the law no longer permitted slavery, and that I had no right to bind my Negroes to rules of obedience I could not lawfully sustain. Ham claims that he resisted the man's tempting invitations, but on Saturday a young negress visited him with better results.

"I urged Ham to keep to his contract for the sake of his companions, if not for his own good. He then said that the colored preacher had declared that I would defraud them of their profits in the end, for that while a white man always compelled the darky to fulfill his part of an agreement, he never

hesitated to break his own when it was to his advantage. Finally it came out that the alluring wench wanted Ham to go with her to a town several counties distant, where both might find employment and seek admission to a night school for Negroes. Ham claimed, too, that he had recently acquired a thirst for knowledge, but I am inclined to believe it is the wench, and not the school, that interests him. I instructed Dan to give him work up near the settlement and to keep an eye on him. But enough of that."

Colonel Whitmore went to hold a consultation with Buck and Chloe presently, and Robert, noticing that the storm was over, searched the sky for patches of blue. As he stood in the yard with his face upturned to the heavens a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and Colonel Whitmore, who had stepped out of the door quietly, asked:

"Of what are you thinking so intently, young man?"

"Of the glimpses of tenderness I have discovered shining through the clouds that obscure your truest nature from your fellow-men, sir. Those streaks of blue melting through the gray of yonder heavens reminded me. And I was wondering, too, if you could be induced to enter into a compact with me."

"Why not, my friend?" questioned the elder man, with a smile wreathing his lips, but with the shadow of pain in his eyes.

As the pair stood searching each other's eyes, the sun suddenly burst through the scurrying clouds, and glancing up at the miracle of light, the colonel exclaimed :

“Ah, that is a good omen ! Give me your hand, my young friend, and your confidence !”

XXIII.

ROBERT LANE'S CONFIDENCE.

WHEN Colonel Whitmore and his guest were again seated in the library, the younger man said:

"No doubt you surmise the nature of the more important part of my confidence, sir."

"I imagine it relates to Negro welfare. You understand my position. I recoil from viewing a future in which the Negro will have equal rank with white men in governmental affairs. And since that possibility was provided for in the sixties and is theoretically imminent, I believe our State powers have done well to impose the only hindering measure admissible. You have not lived in close contact with our Southern Negroes, and can not form an adequate idea of the detriment a wholesale lot of unprincipled voters are to a community, to say nothing of their abuse of the ballot in the larger interests of State and Nation."

"Sir, I do not condemn the law which limits franchise to those who can read, write, and give proof of having three hundred dollars' worth of property, since its restrictions apply to black and white alike. The requirements are not beyond the accomplishment of any citizen of normal faculties,

and if he does not value the privilege of suffrage sufficiently to strive for it by efforts doubly to his own advantage, he lacks in the essentials that make citizenship profitable. But after admitting your new rulings just and reasonable, it remains to be proven that there is really to be equality before the law in the enforcement of the statute, as well as in its wording. Justly applied, it will be of incalculable value to coming generations."

"Right, young man. Instead of being tyrannical the demand is at root humane."

"Then in the face of the scheme carried out on your own plantation, you are reconciled to the education of the colored race."

"Reconciled—yes, that is the right word. I am not a convert to many things to which I have become reconciled. I would not seek to debar the younger generations of Negroes from the opportunities open to them now, nor would I try to suppress the ambitions of those of any age who are responsible for good behavior. But there is an appalling number of Negroes that ignore all opportunities for improvement, live like rats from choice, existing on small thefts, and when these fail laboring from sheer necessity only. These are howling loudest for the rights of suffrage, since now they can neither sell their votes for coin nor receive pay to withhold them, which is the only loss many of them feel in their disfranchisement. Well, the Northern philanthropist or sentimentalist, hearing the senseless clamor through a wall of prejudice,

shouts forth a cry of sympathy that maddens the mob and increases the confusion without in the least remedying the condition of things."

"Perhaps. But your better classes of Negroes are adding their voices in rebellion against the Lily White Republican movement, which certainly demonstrates taxation without representation."

"True enough, and it is time for the Negro to understand that the Republican is not necessarily his friend, any more than that the Democrat is necessarily his enemy. The race must face the truth, that its claim upon Republicans North or South, as a party, is now a thing of history. Our Negroes must also realize that, while they have bitter enemies in the South, their warmest friends and sympathizers are here also."

"What of the present outlook, sir?"

"Well, looking beyond racial agitations of the immediate present, the course of our American Negroes is plainly described. It lies with them individually and collectively to lift the race *if* it can be lifted. Our States do not discriminate against Negroes in the division of public-school funds, which fact is proof of the fairness of our Southern laws at core. Let the Negro enter the avenues of learning at full tilt if he *will*, and prove his capacity to cast ballot with men of character and intellectual standing if he *can*. Every man should acquire fitness for citizenship. All men are born to rights, but none to privileges for which he lacks capacity."

"I agree with you, sir, just so far as accident of

color does not pronounce incapacity upon one, otherwise qualified, to the civil privileges of citizenship. And I sincerely hope it is false that any locality in the South lays the lines of law low enough for one to step over, but raises them to debar one of equal worthiness."

"There will be some unfairness in certain sections of the South for years to come, no doubt. But let the Negro prove his ability to manage his personal affairs decently and prosperously, and so empower himself with fitness to assist in broader concerns. His excuse for illiteracy is vanishing. He must either rise, or concede to a truth that he is deficient by nature to rank as the equal of the white man. I think it will take severe drivers to start the body and keep it going even at a snail's pace."

"And I believe the race has a superabundance of drivers already. It is bewildered by the vastness of the prospect into which it has been driven. It needs leaders, sir!"

"Granted. From what point would *you* lead them and where?"

"From the deserts of illiteracy and ignorance and moral impotency. From the prison cell, the chain-gang, the haunts of idleness and vice, and from the soulless conditions of the back plantation. I would lead them, first of all, to my Master's feet, for He is the true source of healing, light, and inspiration to culture. I would teach the Gospel hand in hand with the rudiments of learning. Sir, give me a chance to lead your gang into the light. They

are too old and stupid, perhaps, to acquire much education, but they are my brothers. Give me the privilege of leading them into the pathway of eternal life!"

Colonel Whitmore searched the earnest face of his guest curiously. "You are a visionary fellow," he said at last, glancing away from the pleading eyes. "You are deceived by the vain imaginings of a creed that has no potency when applied to dumb creatures. Take my gang, for instance. If you wish to experiment, I would advise you to seek more tractable material. My plantation is a mere nook, a corner of darkness. Begin in the open, where the field is broader and more noticeable, my friend."

"It is the darkest corners that are most in need of light. Perpetual darkness breeds loathsomeness. Your gang is indeed made up of pitiable creatures, but they have proven themselves capable of steadfastness to a device for personal benefit. They have dim ideas of the duties of one to the other. They have capacity for higher development."

"Do you hope to transform them into polished gentlemen fit to invade White House crushes?"

"Your humor smacks of sarcasm, sir," replied Robert Lane, smilingly. "Social equality is not offered as an incentive to the race, even by the acknowledged leader implicated in your remark."

"I am not so sure of that. Beneath the whiteness of his fine linen there is a dusky hide."

"And also a noble heart, sir. Did you hear his

famous address at Atlanta, in which he said: 'In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress?' "

"Yes, I heard that address, and shall not soon forget it. But mark you, that leader is a shrewd diplomat. He has the blood of a white father in his veins, and caters to both races. He was too politic to say, we *will* be, or we *must* be. He only said, 'We *can* be.' He has since proven that he himself stands ready to accept social favors when tendered."

"That is his right. He does not seek such favors nor aspire to them; but he has the grace to accept what is offered in sincerity of heart and purpose. Sir, you urged your hospitality upon me with the courtesy of a sovereign and the tenderness of a father or elder brother. Should I have refused it simply because I would not advise my people to seek aggressively social intercourse with the superior race?"

"There was no reason why you should not accept my invitation. But your case is extraordinary. The taint in your blood is so thoroughly subdued with the superior element that it does not obtrude."

"Sir, had you a daughter would you give her to me in marriage?"

"Ah, young man, that is a bold proposition," replied the colonel, with a smile. "I have no daughter."

"You evade the point. I am serious."

"Why hang a decision upon an imaginary situation, young man. Let us proceed. Were I to permit you to instruct my gang, what method would you use?"

"I would attach new significance to things familiar to them, and as their minds grasped and expanded I would arrange methods of instruction to suit their needs. I would begin with a cotton seed, I think."

"I see. But there would be no time except at night."

"I do not ask for more."

"What guaranty can you give me that your efforts will not arouse a spirit of mischief, or that you have not an ax to grind for your own profit?"

"I have shown you my heart, sir."

"You do not comprehend the undertaking. It will be a sacrifice of time and energy to no purpose. I can secure a better position for you, where you can study the race to greater advantage."

"I prefer your plantation and your personal supervision and friendship, sir. I am willing to take the risk of failure."

"Ah, life must have little value to you. But I remember sorrow has come to you lately, and disappointments. I have a mind to grant your request."

"Thank you, thank you, sir! God has directed me here, I am sure."

"I am not a believer in supernatural direction. It is simply that you have chanced upon a lonely

old man, whom you have interested. I will trust to your discretion for a few months' trial of your plan."

"You obligate me greatly, and make it proper for me to reveal the secret of my parentage to you."

"Not if it will violate your happiness."

"You have called me friend and given me your hospitality, knowing my connection with the inferior race. I shall be frank with you, sir, but I ask you to respect my confidence for the sake of others."

"My honor, young man. Enough of that."

"I am the son of your neighbor, Rupert Radcliffe."

"Ah!" exclaimed the colonel, with startled eyes. "And your mother?"

"My mother was his first wife, Patra Dunbar, the quadroon."

"Ah, now I understand why you have impressed me so familiarly. You resemble your mother in some respects, and you are like your grandfather, Major Radcliffe, too; particularly in your bearing."

"I am fortunate that you do not question the truth of my story, sir. It was to confirm my mother's statements that I came South."

"I have no reason to doubt your story. I know your family well. So your mother is living?"

"Yes. I discovered her recently, and beheld my father for the first time yesterday."

"Ah, so you are Dorothy's grandson? No wonder I was attracted to you," said the colonel, re-

flectively. "But enough of that till you care to speak more fully."

"Which will be when I can get my papers from the hotel."

"Your word is sufficient, young man."

"I am grateful for the inference, sir," replied Robert, with emotion. And then he gave the details of his history.

XXIV.

A LONG DELAYED CONFESSION.

THE early morning sun was shining brightly when Victory Radcliffe, returning from the South the day prior to that which proclaimed Payson Bend under quarantine, hurried up the Payson driveway, her face aglow with happiness and eagerness. Stepping lightly across the veranda, she was about to enter the door when she found herself face to face with Hilda Lane.

"Sakes alive, Victory!" exclaimed the woman, in surprise, but adding softly, "I'm mighty glad you've come home, pettie."

"O, Aunt Hilda, what is the matter? You are so worn and sad! Where is Uncle Jerry? What has happened?"

"Jerry has been bad sick, Victory, but he's on the mend now."

"Was it worry about me? Tell me the truth, Aunt Hilda, was it?" asked the girl, piteously. "Did n't he get my letter?"

"His sickness is n't on your head, Victory. He has n't been able to read any letters, but I have n't seen any, for that matter. I reckon Andy's been too flustered to get the mail from the office. Jerry's

sleeping now. But you'd best change your clothes before you go to see him. The smallpox has broke out in town, and I reckon you've come past some of the houses where it is. The doctor says we must be mighty careful about getting it on our clothes and bringing it to Jerry. But don't be scared, Victory; we'll do the best we can to keep clean and such as that, and God'll take care of the rest."

"I know. I did n't suspicion what those red cards were for. Dear me!"

When Jerry Payson opened his eyes an hour later Victory was bending over him with troubled face.

"I knew you were here, Victory," he said. "I smelt the violet stuff on your clothes. I was afraid to let on for a minute, lest I was dreaming. I want you to bring in my chair and sit down in it close by the bed, where I can see the Stars and Stripes, and sing 'My country, 't is of Thee.' I'm out of tune myself, and my ears ache to hear somebody sing."

Victory dashed away her quick tears and did as she was bidden. It was not easy to sing at the moment, but after a little dallying with a corner of the flag, which she had caught up in her fair hands, she began the old hymn, her voice a trifle unsteady but wondrously sweet. When the song was finished she knelt by the bed and burst into tears, with her face against the pillow. Jerry Payson smiled contentedly, and said cheerily:

"It's like old times to have you snubbing up against my shoulder, Victory. I like it, because

by and by, when you get calmed down, you'll be as bright and sassy as a yellow dandelion just busting into bloom after a spring rain."

The girl giggled hysterically, and pinched the sick man's nose ever so gently. "Now I know you're really better, you dear old torment!" she cried.

Andy Peters, the only other occupant of the room, rose from his seat with a sigh, and was going out when Jerry Payson, noticing him, held out his hand. "Shake, old boy," he said, weakly, with a wink and significant wrinkle of his brow. "I'll be about in my chair in a day or two now, I reckon; and maybe I'll have more sense than to let my head hit against things that were n't made for pillows. I reckon it's a fine thing you was with me when I sort of fainted there by the fireplace that day. I might have scrambled into the fire."

"Do n't Jerry, I—"

"Shut up, Andy, and let me have the floor this time!" interposed Jerry, with another mysterious grimace.

"O lordy!" muttered Andy, making queer guttural sounds in his throat as he limped from the room. He returned presently, and laid a brilliantly yellow disk on the coverlet beside the sick man's hand.

"It's getting late in the season, Jerry, but it's a sure enough dandelion. Just popped out since the rains. I saw it in the grass out there, about where that yaller one was that time, and thought

you'd be tickled to see it," said the old man, with a tearful attempt at humor.

"And I am, Andy. Thanky. It's about the yellowest thing I've ever seen in my born days!" exclaimed Jerry Payson, taking the golden flower between his trembling fingers.

"I supposed it would be," commented Andy. "Such a fellow as you are, Jerry. It beats all."

"Andy is about on the lift himself, I'm afraid," said Jerry Payson to Victory after the man had hobbled away. "He looks mighty bad, and coughs fit to kill."

Andy Peters was indeed on the brink of a breakdown, and was stricken with pneumonia, with alarming symptoms, when Jerry Payson was barely able to be lifted into his roller chair. As the disease progressed, Dr. Hilton shook his head doubtfully. Conscious of his own condition, Andy asked timidly:

"How long have I got yet, Doctor?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, Andy. But don't lose heart. Worse cases than yours have been known to recover."

"I reckon so, but the whole world was n't against them."

"O well, the world is n't bothering itself about you," replied the physician, indulgently. But for an hour afterwards the sick man lay with tears slowly trickling down his withered cheeks.

"Do n't give up to your feelings so, Andy. You are n't dead yet," said Mrs. Strong, sympathetically.

"O lordy, Peggy, I'm next thing to dead.

Crown Hill is n't so fine to think about when you 're in the last pinch to it. There 's room in the Peters's lot to bury me, but I 'll need some new black clothes. Drat Betty Bigelow's peas, anyhow!"

"La me, Andy, you 'll have to take a dose of this medicine, I reckon. Your fever 's on the rise, I 'm afraid. Anyway your mind do n't seem to be working sensible," declared Mrs. Strong, who knew nothing about the episode at Miss Bigelow's.

"My mind 's clear a plenty, Peggy, and there 's things I 've got to say before I die. I wish you 'd send for Hilda, and I want Jerry fetched up here, too."

"La me, Andy!"

"There 's no time to waste, Peggy," insisted the man, feebly.

And so it came about that Hilda Lane and Jerry Payson sat beside Andy's bed. Peggy Strong stood near, uncertain whether to leave the room or not. Noticing her, the sick man said:

"Before you settle down, Peggy, I wish you 'd get my bunch of keys out of the press yonder, and go up garret and fetch my old, gray soldier coat down. It 's in the big red chest with them traps of mother's. O lordy!"

"Well, I 'll get the coat in a jiffy, Andy. You lie still and keep ca'm," advised the woman, hurrying away on her errand, and soon returning with a tattered coat, which she laid on the bed.

"O lordy, I suppose I 've got to tell things now!" groaned the miserable sinner.

"Sakes alive, Andy, do n't work yourself up so. I reckon what 's on your mind will keep yet awhile," interposed Miss Lane, kindly.

"Yes, of course it will, old boy," added Jerry Payson, pityingly.

"La me, Andy, if it 's a thing that 's pestering you, you better get it out and done with," urged Mrs. Strong, in opposition to the others.

"I 'low to make a clean breast of things, Peggy, but it is n't easy. O lordy!"

"You wait and rest a bit, Andy," suggested Jerry Payson, brokenly.

"I 've waited to the end of my time, Jerry. I 'll have things out right now. You remember the night before you went off to the army, do n't you? Well, I was hid back of them rose bushes at the end of Timothy Lane's house and heard you talking to Hilda. When I 'd got all I could stand without busting, I showed up and made bold to sit down on the steps with you and Hilda. I spoilt your courting then, but after we 'd started home you ran back and whispered something I did n't get to hear. I 'lowed it was about writing letters to one t'other.

"I guess Hilda minds how I tried to spark her after you went off to the army, but I reckon she never found out why I was so particular about fetching her pappy's mail from the office the next few months. Well, a mite of a box came for her one day, but she never laid eyes on it. It 's in this old gray coat this minute.

"I tried to get Hilda away from you, Jerry;

but she was set against me like all the rest of the world. I got mad at her at last, and went off and joined the rebel army just to get a right to kill you if I got the chance. You mind that day at Cedar Creek, don't you? Well—O lordy! Jerry—Jerry, it was me that shot your eye out! I must have had the devil in me, but when I saw you fall I went crazy over what I'd done. That's why I came back after the war to get the job of waiting on you. But—bad as I felt about your eye—I had the old Harry in me yet, and I did n't more than lay eyes on Hilda till I made up my mind I'd keep you and her from making things up again. But you never appeared to try love-making any more. I always hung round tolerable close though, so you would n't have much chance. I sort of suspicioned you hank-ered for one t'other, in spite of things.

"I've let the cat out of the bag now, Jerry, and I reckon you'll turn against me, too, for good and all. O lordy, I've had the whole creation to fight ever since the day I was born!" wailed the old man, desolately, yielding to a paroxysm of coughing that threatened to throw him into convulsions. When at last the sufferer was easy again he looked at the pair he had wronged with beseeching eyes.

"Andy," said Jerry Payson, with tears streaming down his cheeks and the tenderness of a great soul in his voice, "I forgive what you've done against me. You've suffered a heap in your mind—a plenty for your sins, I reckon—and I've never forgot that day above the mill dam when you saved my life. I

shan't hold anything against you, old boy, so do n't let what's past and done pester you any more."

"O lordy, what a fellow you are, Jerry!" groaned the sick man, gratefully.

Hilda Lane sat silently gazing at the patchwork quilt that covered the creature whose malice had come between her and the fulfillment of her youthful hopes. But she saw only a long array of years, through which she had bravely subdued the yearnings of her being for the dear tie of wifehood and motherhood, and stared at Jerry Payson stupidly when he said:

"Hilda, tell Andy *you* forgive him, too."

"Do n't push her to it, Jerry—give her time—it's a hard thing she's got to forgive," interposed Peggy Strong, reproachfully.

"O lordy, lordy!" wailed Andy, piteously. "I do n't blame you for hating me, Hilda. But I wish you'd get that mite of a box out of this rag of a coat. It's got a gold ring in it. Jerry sent it to you from the army."

But it was Mrs. Strong who searched for the box, and finally laid it into the toil-worn hands of the woman whose mission had been unselfish labor for others. As her fingers closed over the treasure, Hilda Lane said gaspingly:

"Of course I forgive you, Andy. We've all got sins, and you might have done a heap worse than you did. You might have died without telling things or giving me this box. I take it God's had

His eye on this mess of things, and it's for Him to judge you, not me. I forgive you, Andy."

In her own little chamber under the cottage eaves Hilda Lane opened the tiny box with shaking hands. Her famished eyes were greeted by a plain gold band, inside of which was inscribed, "From Jerry to Hilda." When her passion of regretful pain had subsided, the woman slipped the ring on a strand of white tape and hid it in her bosom.

During the afternoon Betty Bigelow, who had noticed Dr. Hilton's frequent visits at the Payson house in the morning, knocked at the back door and asked of Ellen, who responded:

"Is Andy worse, Ellen? Is it the smallpox?"

"'Tain't the smallpox. It's fever in the lights. Andy's are about coughed to slathers, I guess. He's on his last pegs, poor feller. He had us carry Mr. Payson up this morning, and sent for Miss Lane to come over. I s'pose he told them his dying wishes. He's awful holler-eyed and looks like a skiliton."

"Dear me!" sighed Miss Betty, mournfully. "I wish I could see him. Do you think I could, Ellen?"

"I s'pose you could if you was up there where he is. I s'pose you could find the way. I'd go with you if I did n't have my hands in this bread dough."

"O my, I'd have to run home first and slick up a bit. I'll put on my purple wrapper, I guess, and my bead collar. I've heard that a body ought to look bright in a sick room. I'll get Andy some flowers, too."

Miss Betty looked very bright indeed when she returned. Her wrapper was a startling combination of red and yellow roses on a purple ground, and she carried a huge bouquet of brilliantly-colored zinnias, phlox, and larkspur. She was half way up the stairs when she met Mrs. Strong coming down with a tray.

"La me, Betty, you look like a traveling flower garden!" exclaimed the woman, a trifle sarcastically.

"I'm taking these to Andy. Is he too far gone to look at them?"

"I do n't know, I'm sure; but if he is n't they'll finish him, I reckon," replied Mrs. Strong, dryly. "I guess you can find the way. I'll be up again in a minute or two."

Miss Betty reached the sick-room, and peered in curiously before entering, with cautious movements. Andy, with closed eyes and peaceful countenance, was propped up on the pillows, breathing raspingly. The visitor stole close to the bed, and gazed at the wreck of manhood with pity and grief puckering her face.

"Andy, Andy!" she whispered, frightened at her own daring.

The half-dozing man opened his eyes quickly. A flash of anger crossed his face, followed by a gleam of humor as he surveyed the gorgeously attired woman; but he finally closed his eyes again without speaking.

"I want you to forgive me for them peas bust-

ing, Andy. I'll never get over my misery if you do n't. I would n't have had your feelings riled up so, and your Sunday clothes splattered that way, for anything in the world. You'll forgive me, won't you?" pleaded the woman, tearfully.

"O lordy! It was the worst mess I ever got into. I can smell it yet."

"I know. It was awful. I'll never have a bit of rest if you die without forgiving me."

"Well, I'll give in, Betty, if you'll clear out of here now," consented the man, remembering how much had been forgiven him.

"My, my, but I'm glad to hear you say that, Andy. And look, I've brought some flowers to cheer your dying hour."

"O lordy!" moaned Andy.

"My sweet peas are in full way of blooming, too; but I'm saving them to put on your coffin."

"O lordy, lordy, lordy!" shuddered Andy, despairingly.

"La me, Betty, you'd best not be too frisky with your flowers. Andy's no notion of dying yet awhile; but he needs rest mighty bad just now. He is n't in trim to talk—it is n't good for his fever," insinuated Mrs. Strong, who had come in quietly, and was annoyed at what she had heard.

"My, I'll go then," declared Miss Betty, aggrievedly. "I've been trying to make Andy happy with my flowers. I've heard that flowers in a sick-room make a body forget how bad they feel."

"Oh! o-h! o-o-o-h, lordy!" came from the bed.

"My, my, but he's bad off, poor fellow," murmured the visitor, laying down her flowers and slipping out of the room with a wild backward glance at the sufferer.

"Peggy, I wish you'd take them pesky things down and tell Ellen to put them through the sausage mill or fling them in the fire!" whimpered Andy, distractedly.

"La me, Andy, do n't take on so. I'll put these innocent posies out of your sight. Betty means well, but she has n't got judgment, it seems like. There, now, ca'm down and take this medicine," said Mrs. Strong, soothingly.

"I wish that pesky old maid had n't come and upset me again. I've been as ca'm and peaceful as a hive of honey since I talked to Jerry and Hilda and got them to forgive me; but now I'm riled up worse 'n a hornet's nest with a fire in it."

"Well, swallow this now, and forget Betty as quick as you can."

"Forget! O lordy, I can smell them peas yet! I wish you'd get a fresh bag of hops for my chest, Peggy. Hotter 'n common. And some more soap-stones for my feet—hotter 'n common."

"I will, Andy. You keep ca'm and lay still."

But the anxious woman had no sooner left the room than Andy staggered out of bed, and leaning his dizzy head out of the window beseeched:

"O God A'mighty, you was amazing good to let Jerry get well, and I do n't deserve any more favors; but I can't bear to have that pesky Betty Bigelow

piling her nasty flowers on top of my coffin when I'm past kicking. I've quit off cussing the niggers, and made a clean breast of things to Jerry and Hilda and got them to forgive me. Let me live yet awhile, God A'mighty, and I'll fix things so the niggers'll get what I've got in the bank when I die to help them along in schooling and such. The world's been against me my whole life! Let me live yet awhile, and I'll try to do better'n I have before this! Amen!"

Blinded with weakness and fainting from exhaustion, Andy dragged himself to the bed and fell into a prolonged stupor. Mrs. Strong, finding her patient unconscious and the bedclothes half on the floor, was perplexed, but applied her hot remedies, and, after forcing a stimulant between the man's blue lips, began a vigorous rubbing of his cold hands and arms.

"I reckon he was flighty over them posies Betty fetched," she soliloquized. "Or maybe he sensed a fit of some sort coming on and tried to get up to call me. He's got gumption in some ways, Andy has."

"H-m-m-m-mn-o-oh!" sighed the sufferer, returning to consciousness.

"Are you getting warm now, Andy?" questioned the anxious nurse.

"O-o-o-oh, lordy!" was the feeble response.

"Well, keep ca'm and lay still, then."

"Some—more—blan—kets, Peggy!"

"Why, you're all of a steam now, Andy. But lay still and I'll get them."

Fifteen minutes later Andy lay sleeping like an infant. He was still asleep and breathing easily when the doctor made his evening call. After examining his patient the physician declared:

"He is sweating like a trooper, and his fever is falling. He is decidedly better."

And from that day on Andy Peters steadily improved.

Although Hilda Lane did not let Andy's confession lessen her attendance upon him during the critical period of his illness, she avoided Jerry Payson, merely exchanging greetings when she passed him on the veranda each evening on her way to relieve Mrs. Strong and Victory of the care of the sick man for the night. Strive as she would, she could not control a new feeling of shyness in the presence of the man she had loved so faithfully, and whose wife she would have been in all probability had not Andy's treachery deprived her of such happiness. Sleeping memories awoke and haunted her persistently, and to her greater embarrassment there was a feverish appeal in Jerry's bearing toward her never before exhibited.

When the time came that Andy no longer needed a night nurse, Miss Lane was unusually busy and failed to visit the Paysons for several days. In fact, she drove out to Sam Ritchie's early every morning, seldom returning to the cottage till sundown, during the first week of Andy's convalescence. She

was about to turn into her yard one evening when Jerry Payson called from his veranda:

"O Hilda! Will you be extry busy to-morrow?"

"Sakes alive, Jerry, I'm always extry busy."

"I know, but could n't you come over and sit awhile to-morrow? You could fetch your sewing, you know."

"I can't to-morrow. Sam's wife is n't quite able to be about yet, and there's extry work out there, now."

"Seems like you're always helping Sam's wife here lately."

"Well, she needs me and I don't grudge what I can do for her. I'll try to get over before many days, Jerry."

"Come as soon as you can, Hilda," replied the man, with a sigh.

But the week went out, and another was slipping away without bringing Hilda Lane to the Payson house. Each morning the old soldier took up his hopeful watch on the veranda, singing over his entire stock of war songs to pass the time, and each evening he consoled himself by the thought, "She will come to-morrow." And then one day, when he was wearily drooping from new disappointment, he saw a group of people approaching the cottage.

"Dear me, Uncle Jerry, look there!" cried Victory, coming out of the house. "That is Liberty on the stretcher! She has got the smallpox herself now, I suppose. Poor Aunt Hilda! She has her hands full all the time."

"Yes," sighed Jerry Payson, "I reckon I 'll have to give up looking for her to come over here now for a month, even if she does n't get the smallpox herself."

"Dr. Hilton told me only last night that he thought the last case had developed. He said the quarantine would probably be raised soon. And he said that Liberty was holding out splendidly."

"That was last night, Victory. A body can't say what a night will bring about. Are you sure that was Liberty on the stretcher?"

"Yes. I saw Aunt Hilda lift the parasol as they went through the gate. I am sure it was a black face I saw on the pillow."

As before recorded, it was of a surety Liberty Despard who was borne to the cottage that memorable day.

XXV.

REWARDS OF FAITH.

VICTORY RADCLIFFE had found the days subsequent to her return from the South doubly burdened. Distressed at finding her uncle so ill, she had devoted herself to him as constantly as her many household duties permitted. Ellen was slow, and seldom accomplished more than the roughest work, and Mrs. Strong was scarcely relieved from her worries about her brother, when Andy's sickness had imposed new anxieties. But aside from her domestic cares, Victory was bearing a biting pain and giving no sign.

She had found the Horines absent from home on her return, and readily fell in with the idea that they had left town at the first announcement of the malignant disease that had demoralized so many. But knowing nothing at all of the quarrel between Eric and his father and its dreadful results, nor of the fact that Mrs. Horine, having received her letter to Eric, not imagining its importance, had tucked it away and forgotten its existence, the girl grew more and more disheartened at her lover's prolonged silence.

Prohibited from visiting her young friends in

Payson Bend, and overburdened with work and anxieties of various kinds during the weeks of her uncle's and Andy Peter's illness, the girl grew thin and pale. She tried to appear cheerful and wholly interested in the comfort of her family, but the constant pain of love's hidden wound and sad repine wore upon her. She gladly welcomed the sunsets, for then Hilda Lane always came to the relief of the household in the night care of the sick, and Victory was free to steal away to the quiet darkness of her own room, to forget her weariness and sorrow in sleep, which was the boon she craved.

During Andy's convalescence she received a letter from her Grandmother Radcliffe, pleading for the speedy fulfillment of her promise to return South for an extended visit. Heartsick and restless, the girl decided to accept the invitation as soon as the health of her family was sufficiently restored, and the quarantine lifted from the town. But before that anticipated time arrived, Liberty Despard was stricken down, and Victory felt that she must postpone her trip indefinitely. She could not think of deserting Miss Lane at such a time.

It soon transpired that Liberty had escaped the smallpox. After a few days of close proximity to death she rallied, and it was thought that her recovery was a matter of time only. But the hope was without proper foundation. Apparently free from bodily suffering, the girl speedily became the shadow of her former self, and her weakness increased at an alarming rate. She was lying on the

comfortable lounge in Miss Lane's little sitting-room early one evening, when she said to Victory, who was her faithful attendant:

"I'd like to see your Uncle Jerry again sometime, Victory. Is Andy able to wheel him over, or could you?"

"To be sure I could. I'll get him now. He spoke of it himself at the supper table this evening, but I was afraid it might worry you."

"It never worries me to see my friends. But I did n't mean to put you to the trouble to-night."

"Why, it is n't one bit of trouble, Liberty," declared Victory, hastening away.

"I'd like to go too, Victory," said Andy, when the girl was preparing to wheel her uncle to the cottage. "I've got things to say to Liberty myself."

"O well, then, come right along, Andy. I knew you were n't able to wheel Uncle Jerry, and did n't think about your wanting to go. Liberty will be glad to see you, no doubt."

"She's no call to be, but I want to see her all the same."

When the three had reached Miss Lane's little sitting-room and were comfortably seated, Liberty asked:

"Why did n't you bring Mrs. Strong, Victory? It would seem like old times to see you all together again."

"Grandma is coming this moment, Liberty. She was n't quite ready when we came."

After some general conversation, Hilda Lane

said: "I've never heard you tell about your visit at your Grandmother Radcliffe's, Victory."

With more vivacity of manner than she had shown for weeks, Victory gave a recital of her experiences in the South, describing Nolville, her impressions of the people she had met, and finishing with a vivid word-picture of the old Radcliffe mansion and its interesting inmates.

"I wish you could go with me next time, Liberty," she remarked in conclusion.

"I would like to go, thank you, Victory. It would be pleasant to travel with you, and I should be delighted to see my own aged grandmothers at the plantation of the gentleman who has been so kind to Robert. And I think I have told you that Robert has selected a college for me to attend this winter, but—well—I hardly think I shall ever leave Payson Bend."

"O yes, you will, Liberty! You are not able now, of course, but you'll be stronger when the weather gets cooler," declared Victory, cheerfully. "You must n't get the blues and give up heart."

"I'm not blue, but I've been *called*," replied the girl, softly, unmindful that another visitor had come into the room from the side door, which was out of range of her vision. "It was the night I had the call to nurse the Payson Bend people. I had fallen asleep after the first call, and suddenly I felt a touch on my forehead, and then a voice spoke through the darkness and said: 'It is I, be not afraid, Liberty, for I have put My seal upon your forehead,

and soon you shall be with Me in the glory of paradise!' That was why I was so willing to obey the first call. I knew that my days were numbered, and that all was well."

"What was the first call, Liberty?" asked Victory, with bated breath. "Just how did it come to you?"

"It came in the middle of the night. I had been sleeping when the voice woke me, saying, 'Go nurse the plague-stricken of Payson Bend, Liberty Despard, for so shall you mightily serve your people.' I sat up in bed and listened, but there was no other word or sound. I was not frightened, because I have been praying all my life to be directed to the best service I could give my people. I don't understand just how my labor for a few weeks among the sick of Payson Bend is going to serve my race; but I believe my call came of God, who plainly marked my path for His own purpose. I believe, too, that I shall soon be with my mother and my Savior and all the glorious company of heaven. I feel the touch upon my forehead that woke me at that second call. It is the pleasant seal of life—called death."

When the sweet, languid voice had ceased to speak it was very quiet in the little sitting-room, until Andy Peters, who was sitting near Jerry Payson, suddenly yielded to heavy sobs. The strain was broken, and every member of the small company was convulsed with emotion, overcome with

the might of Liberty Despard's simple, sturdy faith.

It was Mr. Hodge, who had come in quietly at a signal from Miss Lane at Liberty's first words, and who, shaken with intense feeling, suddenly slid from his chair to his knees and began to pray. It was an impassioned appeal to the Heavenly Father signally to reward Liberty's faith and labor, followed by a pledge to give largely of his own substance and time as a commissioner in the furtherance of the better welfare of the race so nobly represented by the girl, and concluded with an eloquent plea for the guidance and blessing of the Heavenly Host in his efforts and on the people yet awaiting help and salvation.

A painfully sweet and solemn half-hour followed this breaking up of hearts and souls, but soon afterwards Mr. Hodge departed, and the others were speaking of going home also, when Liberty said:

"We may never all be together again on earth. Could n't we sing, 'My Country, 't is of Thee!'"

"O glory, Liberty, you took the words I was going to say right out of my mouth!" declared Jerry Payson. "Let's all join and sing, comrades!" and suiting his action to his words the old soldier immediately began the song.

It was a common occurrence for this particular company to sing that especial hymn, but a peculiar sensation thrilled every heart when the unusual sound of Andy Peter's thin, uncertain voice joined in feebly. It was too much for Jerry Payson finally,

and near the end of the second verse he leaned towards Andy, grasping his bony hand and shouting softly but triumphantly:

"Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!"

"Yes, it's just that way, Jerry."

"O glory! glory hallelujah!" cried Jerry Payson. "I knew you'd come home by 'n' by, old boy! This is a fine world to live in anywhere. But to live under the Stars and Stripes—O glory, it beats the rest of the world all holler!"

"The Stars and Stripes will do as well as anything, I reckon. I s'pose the world is n't as bad a place as might be. Maybe it's against me the same as ever, but I don't feel the jag of it like I did before I was sick. The heft of what pestered me seems to be gone. I've never acted like I ought to to you, Liberty, and I have n't any sort of right to ask a favor of you, but I come over on purpose to ask you to forgive me the way I've treated you and the mean things I've said about the niggers in general. I wish you'd forgive and forget what's past, and give me a chance to do better by you from this on."

"Of course, I forgive you, Mr. Peters. I've never kept anything treasured up against you long at a time."

And so, with peace in their hearts, the friends and associates of many years parted for the night, and not one of them suspected that a holy messenger was already descending the midnight skies, or that

morning would find Liberty Despard in the presence of her mother, her Savior, and all the glorious company of heaven.

Never in the history of Payson Bend was a funeral so largely attended as that of Liberty Despard. The church was filled with eager people, and many more, unable to enter the building, hastened to the cemetery to station themselves near the grave for the final obsequies. The minister, fully informed of Liberty's rare faith and obedience, and of the whole fabric of her life history and final sacrifice of self to the need of the community, had ample inspiration for an immortal sermon; and the heavily draped chair at the rear of the pews, empty but eloquent, was a reproach that broke the hardest heart in the gathering.

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren," began the man of God in the deathlike stillness that marked the opening of his address, and then he choked on a sob, wiped his eyes, and getting control of himself, continued his text to a tearful, "humble, and contrite" audience.

Whatever Liberty might have done for her race had she lived, it is certain that she did indeed "mightily serve her people" in her death so near the hour of her unselfish devotion to her one-time enemies.

Public sentiment at high tide is liable to overflow its own reserves, and so it was at Payson Bend for a season. Many bitter, indifferent, or careless members of the community were yet suffering,

gloomed and softened, through the recent harvesting of death in their midst. And while only a few had been actually served by Liberty Despard, the public was grateful to her and felt reproached for its former hostilities toward her. It is always a haunting reflection, when brought to the realization, that we have spurned an "angel unawares" at our very doors.

The once despised Negro girl having recently acquired favor as a heroine, became in the manner of her death a martyr also.

Payson Bend was repentant. Repentance has proven to be the latchstring of many a treasury.

Understanding human nature fairly well, Mr. Hodge launched his project while sentiment was at high tide. Before the sun had set upon Liberty's new-made grave he had begun to canvass the town for the purpose of raising a handsome fund to be known as the "Liberty Despard Mission Fund," the annual interest to be used as a benefit—spiritual, educational, and otherwise—for the colored race. He proposed to have the sum subscribed and invested, ready for dedication and christening, on the anniversary of Liberty's birthday in November. Aside from being actuated in his labor of love by the noblest Christian motives, Mr. Hodge was a shrewd, influential business man, and having set his hand to an undertaking he did not consider failure. Heading the subscription-list with the half of his own fortune, he could present his cause with confidence. He canvassed the community thoroughly

and speedily, and found among the humbler classes none too poor to add a few dimes to the fund, and among the well-to-do none too niggardly to give generous proof of their willingness to assist a worthy cause.

And so not only did Liberty Despard's life stand out clearly and beautifully as an example of Negro capability and responsiveness to noble influences, but her faith having survived a crucial test undimmed, symbolized her name and made it the key to golden opportunities for many of her people.

The magnetism of a Christian faith that survives the furnace fire unscorched is an influence immeasurable.

XXVI.

A BROKEN CONTRACT.

A GOLDEN August moon hung in the heavens above a unique spectacle set in the space between the cabins and other buildings on Colonel Whitmore's plantation. For within the shadow of the largest warehouse and its sheltering trees Robert Lane's remarkable night-school was in session.

Harvest had begun, and the cotton pickers had labored from dawn till dark, but had assembled as usual after supper for study. The nightly lessons were always followed by a magic lantern exhibition of some sort. Usually it was a life-size representation of the Man of Galilee upon which Robert fixed the attention of his rude class while explaining the scene portrayed in simple, forcible words. Each story was made doubly effective as an incident of Christ's ministry on earth coupled with its personal significance to men of all successive ages.

On this particular August evening, lessons being over, the torches extinguished, and the long black-board—with its display of singular chalk marks, which only triumphant pupils and indulgent teacher could possibly identify with the letters so crudely imitated—set aside, the Negroes had stretched them-

selves on the ground. Lying thus at ease, they formed a semi-circle in front of a large white canvas fastened to the wall of the warehouse. Upon the canvas Robert Lane had thrown a richly-colored reflection. It was the picture of Christ healing the leper.

The theme was especially appealing to the depraved Negroes, and the inferences were so skillfully drawn and applied to their needs that their hearts were thrilled and softened. There was no mistaking their interest as they gazed and listened with hungry intentness. Robert was more and more convinced of the presence in all human creatures of that strange sympathy which needs only to be sought and touched in the most ignorant mind to respond to the story of Divine tenderness and love.

Robert had met with meager encouragement during the first week of his endeavors at the settlement. The Negroes, while appreciative of the entertainment furnished each evening, were at first stupidly indifferent to the opportunity offered them for learning. But the consecrated instructor patiently labored on—enduring much, hoping much, believing much—and gradually one after the other were won to the task of learning the alphabet as the beginning of other things.

Night after night Robert had rewarded the pathetic efforts of his dull pupils with splendid Bible pictures he had been at much trouble and expense to get, and told and retold the beautiful stories of the gracious Master's ministries and miracles. The

soul-starved Negroes never wearied of the recitals, and often begged to have them repeated. And for the generous missionary, who lavished time and patience upon them without price or visible profit, the uncouth men had conceived a strong affection.

Indeed, Ham was finally the only diffident member of the gang; and his lack of gratitude and interest came from brooding over the restraint put upon him by his fellows. He was still infatuated with the negress who had caused his first offense, and who continued to visit the borders of the plantation, seeking interviews with him, until Dan roughly forbade her to come near the premises. Ham was resentful, and indulged in thoughts of the temptress too often for his own content. The end of the season seemed very far away, and he feared the woman would leave the neighborhood before he had reached the honorable fulfillment of his contract.

Upon this glorious August night, however, even Ham was thoroughly interested, and with the others sought to delay the withdrawal of the rare picture, so wonderfully reflected on the canvas, by asking simple questions concerning it. Robert replied indulgently, for he was always delighted at the least inquiry for knowledge, and always felt greatly rewarded for his labor when his eager charges clamored for another vision of the "Hebenly Mars" after the next night's lesson.

Colonel Whitmore was in the background on this occasion, waiting to take Robert home with him in his coach. Directly after the light of the lantern

was extinguished Buck drove forward, and the two men were getting into the conveyance when Dinah and Sarah, who, though decrepit with age, were among the most diligent of the night class, approached and asked the Colonel for the gift of some paper and pencils. The news of Liberty's death had not yet reached them, and they wanted to print the alphabet and have Robert send it to her, that she might know how very learned her two grandmothers were becoming.

"You shall have the paper to-morrow without fail," declared the Colonel, soberly, "but I shall claim the first copies you make. I'm mighty proud of you both, I can tell you."

The old women laughed with joy at their master's approval, and happily waddled to their cabin door, where they stood crooning to each other as they watched the coach disappear along the moon-lit road.

There were three white residents at the settlement. They were the general director, the keeper of the supply store, and one Anton Lewis, whose business it was to direct the drying and baling of the new cotton. Unknown to the gang, these men constituted a night watch, together with Dan, who usually kept guard alone till midnight, the others then dividing the after part of the night among themselves. The task was made easy by means of a common reflector street lamp, stationed at the far end of the long, curved row of cabins, and as the office building was opposite the last cabin at the near

end of the row, every cabin door in the curve was plainly visible to the guards, whose quarters were in the rear of the office building.

The cotton gin and warehouses were lighted in similar manner, and besides these provisions four vigilant bloodhounds were chained at intervals at the rear of the main buildings, to insure the new cotton against pillagers that might easily approach unseen by way of the timber out of range of the guards.

But in spite of the precautions, Colonel Whitmore's coach had scarcely been gone an hour when a form glided from the sheltering timber, crossed the road within a hundred yards of the office, and was soon safely hidden in the cotton-field beyond. The intruder was the negress so fatal to Ham's peace of mind. Only the wise old moon witnessed her coming, but her departure was destined to be discovered with serious results.

Dan noticed a peculiar note, as of a desolate dove calling its mate, several times before midnight, and when Anton Lewis took up the vigil he too heard it, and with quick suspicion watched the lighted path between his post and the light at the end of the row of cabins intently. The mournful cry seemed to rise from the cotton-field near at hand, and grew more and more distinct and frequent. At one o'clock a burly figure emerged from the cabin occupied by Ham and several other Negroes. Anton Lewis instantly recognized the form so darkly sil-

houetted against the light, and as it stole around the corner of the cabin hastily awoke Dan, and imparted his belief that mischief was on foot.

Dan, quickly alert, hurried across the road and slipped along in the shadows back of the cabins till he reached the point where Ham had disappeared. The cotton rows were little more than a dozen yards from the cabins, and like a silvered sea the field stretched away under the flood of moonlight. But not a leaf trembled, not a white crest quivered, so far as the silent watcher in the shadows could detect, for the space of twenty minutes; but then his roving eyes caught a movement, and presently he discovered two cowering forms leaving the field and crossing the road toward the timber, far below the office.

Dan ran to the office, gave a few hurried directions, unchained one of the hounds, and, giving it the scent, started in pursuit of Ham. In a few minutes the settlement was aroused and ready for action, a part of the gang following Dan, who, with the hound in leash, easily traced the fugitives to the shallow stream, where they had taken to the water.

In less than a half-hour Ham was overtaken, in company with the negress who had lured him to the reckless venture, and surrounded. Some of his captors were so enraged at his flight, and incensed at the venomous utterances of the wench, that they threatened her bodily harm. But, in face of her danger, the woman followed her captive lover back to the settlement, boldly declaring her power to call

down destruction upon the whole company if Ham were harmed.

Dan was in a merciless temper, and was tempted to let the gang make short work of the truant. Anton Lewis had secretly saddled a mule and slipped away under cover of the timber to apprise Colonel Whitmore of the situation, and the other two white men urged the wisdom of waiting till morning to adjust matters, to little purpose. The Negroes were impatient, and suspicious of delay. Their evil tendencies were fully aroused, and after prolonged mutterings they broke out into a clamorous demand for Ham's execution as the only surety against the overthrow of the compact so nearly completed.

Nero, the most vicious of the gang, was the leading spirit, and, as Dan showed no disposition to interfere, the two white men soon lost control of the bloodthirsty mob. Ham stood leaning against the corner of the warehouse, hopeless and sullen, and the negress hovered near, alternately berating him for refusing to speak and pledge himself to hold out to the end of the harvest, and cursing the growling Negroes for their insistent demands. But Ham could not be induced to utter a word.

The fury increased to its climax, and then the confusion suddenly lessened and there was a critical movement. Ham's execution seemed inevitable. With a writhe in the air, the pulley rope swung out from the warehouse crane and a pair of black hands caught the end of it and made a noose. But when the noose was about to be placed over Ham's unre-

sisting head the negress sprang forward like a wild-cat and, catching the rope, fought over it with Dan and Nero like a demon.

In the midst of the turmoil a horseman dashed into the scene, hatless, coatless, and ghastly with the fear of being too late to prevent the tragedy. It was Robert Lane, who, on the arrival of Anton Lewis at Colonel Whitmore's, had sprung on the mule the man had ridden, and started for the plantation immediately. The gray of the morning was beginning to melt the night away, but the sentinel lamps were still casting their yellow light into the arena where the mob had gathered. Robert worked his way directly to Ham, and laying his hands on the Negro's brawny shoulders looked into his repulsive face, exclaiming:

"Ham, Ham, what have you done? Tell me. I will stand by you!"

The commotion ceased, and the frantic negress, discovering the possible rescuer, quit fighting over the rope, and the whole gang grew silent and attentive. But Ham, surprised into speech, muttered stupidly:

"Go way, Mars'r Lane!"

The wench fell to the ground and howled.

"Get up and keep quiet!" commanded Robert, sternly.

"Go way, Mars'r Lane. I'se no 'count," mumbled Ham again.

"Were you leaving the plantation for good, Ham?"

"Ye' sah. 'Count of Loozy. Go way, Mars'r Lane."

"You were doing wrong, Ham. You were breaking your word and cheating the gang out of their harvest, just because of the foolish temptation of a woman. By and by, when the cotton is all gathered and sold and the money divided, you can take your own share and go away with Loozy if you like, but now you must hold to your contract."

Ham's face twitched painfully, and the wench laid flat on the ground and howled again.

"Get up and keep still!" commanded Robert, more harshly than before.

"We 'se done tol' Ham 'bout dat Loozy 'nough times, Mars'r Lane. We 'se ain' gwinter trus' him no mo'!" interrupted Dan, making a fresh noose in the rope.

"We 'se done tol' Ham 'bout dat Loozy 'nough times!" clamored the gang with rising excitement, closing around the group.

"Wait, brothers!" exclaimed Robert, realizing the desperate impulse that was swaying the men.

"We 'se done tol' Ham 'bout dat fool Loozy de las' time!" growled Nero, snatching the rope from Dan's careless hands and flinging it upward so swiftly and deftly that Robert did not comprehend the movement till the loop fell over Ham's head. But quick as a flash the young man's hands, which were still on Ham's shoulders, slipped up into the noose and his wrists were caught and drawn firmly against the Negro's ebony neck.

"Pull yo' han's out, Mars'r Lane!" commanded Nero, holding the rope taut, while a score of others were clutching at the slack with fiendish impatience to jerk the hulk of their brother into the air.

The negress sprang forward again, but half a dozen rough hands drew her back, holding her fast in spite of her fierce struggles for freedom.

"Brothers, loosen this rope and release Ham and me!" requested Robert Lane, quietly, turning his head sidewise and looking backward with difficulty, for he was pinioned close to Ham's bosom. "I have a guaranty—a promise to offer you. You can not afford this crime. It would be your ruin. Nero! Dan! loosen this rope!"

"We 'se done tol' Ham 'bout dat fool Loozy de las' time!" declared Dan, sullenly, making no move to obey."

"We 'se done tol' Ham 'bout that Loozy de las' time, Mars'r Lane!" reiterated Nero, tightening on the rope.

"Yes, I know, brothers. Your patience has been sorely tried," replied Robert, gently, "but our Heavenly Master has been patient with you and me through greater trials. I have not wronged you, my brothers. I would lay down my life to save any one of you from death. I ask you to hear what I have to say. Is it too great a favor?"

"Loose that rope, yo' Dan! yo' Nero! Loose dat rope!" cried old Dinah, authoritatively. "Mars'r Lane 's de bes' friend we 'se got in dis worl'!"

"Loose dat rope!" echoed many voices, and as

the two leaders made no move to obey, a hideously dish-faced giant leaped forward and, loosening the noose, lifted it over Ham's head.

Robert threw one arm about the prisoner's shoulders protectingly, as he faced the mob, saying:

"Brothers, I will stand responsible for Ham's actions until his contract is filled. I will ask Colonel Whitmore to agree to that. Give him another chance, and if he fails again I will take his place in the field, and you shall have his share of the harvest among you. Do you understand? You shall hold my life as security for Ham's keeping of the contract. Is not my life worth as much to you as his?"

"De Lawd bress yo', Mars'r Lane!" cried Loozy. And Ham, shaken by such evidence of brotherly love, hung his head and moaned. Dinah and Sarah began to sway and wail dismally, and the mob fell back wonderingly.

"Sit down on the ground, brothers, your night's rest was interrupted," said Robert, gently, conscious of the advantage he had gained for the moment. "I will tell you a story while we are waiting for morning and Colonel Whitmore."

There was an interval of hesitancy, and the Negroes looked at each other inquiringly. Presently the dish-faced giant dropped to the ground with a sigh, and one by one the others followed his example, all save Dan and Nero, who remained standing near Ham and his protector. Robert glanced

over the small sea of eager faces, and after striving with memory for a few moments he riveted the attention of every listener upon his first statement:

"Brothers, not one of you can tell how many hairs you have on your head. Neither can I tell how many hairs I have on my head. But God knows, because He has numbered the hairs of your head and mine; and He knows why your hair is kinky, and why the white man's is straight. Once long ago God made a man whose hair was the secret of his great strength."

From this beginning Robert proceeded to tell the ancient story of Samson, and of how his downfall came about through the evil influence of a woman, carefully choosing portions from the scenes and incidents of his career and imbuing them with the vivid coloring of life and action.

Possessed of the imagination and genius of an artist, as well as of rare tact, Robert Lane adapted the barbarities and situations of his story so perfectly to the understanding of his rude listeners that he held them spellbound. He brought the thrilling recital to a close just as Colonel Whitmore and Anton Lewis arrived upon the scene, their approach having been unnoticed save by Robert and the three Negroes standing near him. Finishing his story, Robert turned to Dan and asked quietly:

"Will you explain this affair to the Colonel, or shall I?"

"S'pect I 'll tell him in de office, sah," answered Dan, reservedly. But Colonel Whitmore waved him

aside, and hastened to Robert with relief in his eyes as they fell upon Ham.

The gang gathered closely around the central group, watching and listening intently while Robert explained the situation and presented his own proposition. Without comment the planter turned to the negress who was responsible for the trouble, and asked:

"What have you to say, Loozy? You are to blame for Ham's trouble. I can't accept Mr. Lane's offer; it would be unjust to him and unfair to me. I'll take *you* as bond for Ham's working out his contract. I'll take *you* and no other!"

The wench howled plaintively.

"Enough of that!" commanded the Colonel, taking a firm grip upon the woman's shoulder. "I've got no time to waste with this sort of nonsense. You came to my premises and stole one of my laborers. I'll have you jailed if you're going to go balky."

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, Massa Whitmo', lemme go! I ain't stole Ham! He jes' tote himse'f wid his own laigs!" declared the wench, viciously.

"Get some handcuffs, Dan," ordered the Colonel, calmly, evading Robert's bewildered eyes.

"Lemme go, Massa Whitmo'! I'll nevah come back no mo'!" wailed Loozy in terror.

Dan came with the handcuffs and slipped them on her wrists with difficulty, for she cursed and struggled with her captor.

"You'd better get an ankle chain, too, Dan,"

suggested the Colonel, composedly. But Loozy fell to the ground humbled when the heavy chain was brought. Glancing at Robert's beseeching face, the Colonel motioned to Dan and asked of the negress, "What are you willing to do, Loozy?"

"What yo' want, Massa?" questioned the wench, piteously.

"I want you to stand for Ham's good behavior till the end of his contract, but if you'd rather let Ham hang and get yourself into the penitentiary in the bargain, it's all the same to me. Speak up if you've got anything to say. It's time the pickers were getting to work."

"Yo' gwinter let Ham go free?"

"Yes, he can go to his work as usual, but I'll have no tomfoolery going on here. I'll have to lock you in the strong room back of the office, unless you'd rather pick cotton during the day with plenty of grub for your pay, and only be locked up at night."

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, Massa Whitmo'! I'se no slave! I'se free! Lemme go!"

"Put that chain on Loozy, Dan, and you and Buck hist her into the coach. I'll have to take her to Nolville and jail her. Put that noose on Ham, Nero. We've fooled away enough time with this business. Let's finish the job you've started, and then you fellows get into the field."

But evading Dan's grasp, the wench, thoroughly conquered, flung herself at the Colonel's feet, screaming:

"I 'll wo'k in de fiel', Massa! I 'll sleep in de strong room! Let Ham go free!"

"Ah, very well, shut up then! Take off those irons, Dan. Throw that rope aside, Nero. But, look here, Ham, I want you and Loozy to bear in mind that I 'll not stop to make terms if there's any more tomfoolery!"

In a remarkably short time order was restored, and the whole force were at work in the cotton. But Robert was considerably shaken by the morning's experiences. It was nearly noon before the Colonel was at liberty to speak confidentially, but then, with a smile wreathing his lips and a gleam of humor in his eyes, he said:

"Rather took your breath this morning, did n't I? Thought me harsh, heartless, no doubt; but I 'll tell you, young man, a planter's got to hold the whip hand over these rascals. There's no other way to manage them. I knew what the outcome of my threats to Loozy would be, and the gang is satisfied. Ham won't try to escape while the wench is held, and she is glad enough to work out the penalty of her crime without formal conviction and sentence."

"Crime?"

"Ha, ha! A nigger can be arrested for a less offense, and sent to the pen to boot. But I had no intention of carrying out my threat. A serious disturbance was on, and had to be settled. My bluff worked like a charm and no harm was done, for the

wench is a regular hussy. She would have gotten Ham into some sort of mischief the moment a temptation arose."

"But you have no legal right to detain the woman."

"Ah, it is easy to add verbal amendments to our code. Like your Northern Yankies we Southerners are inventive when emergencies arise. We're obliged to have expansive license in our dealings with Negroes. That's where the law of compensation comes in."

Robert was not convinced of the justice of his friend's vigorous method of settling the difficulty; but although he felt that there was a sort of unspeakable wisdom in the adjustment, he realized more than ever how broad and deep a chasm separated the Negro serf from the high plain of brotherhood with the superior race. His spirits rose before the hour for lessons, however. The Negroes were in excellent humor at noon, and the weather was all that could be desired. Oddly enough, when the pickers came from the field at twilight they were singing an old plantation jingle, and Colonel Whitmore, who was standing in the office door, smiled genially as the army passed him, and said to Robert a moment later:

"Bravo! 'All's well that ends well,' saith the poet. The morning star witnessed a diabolical scene in this arena, but the vesper star beholds the gala of happy harvesters. It is a tribute to the law of

compensation when the sun sets clear after the fury of a tornado has shaken the day."

"Yes, sir; and when earth's sun shall have set for us one final evening, then indeed that law shall be fulfilled," replied Robert, lifting his eyes to the high heavens. "And then we shall know the joy of compensation for the storms that have so sadly shaken our souls in life's dismaying trials."

"A pretty sentiment, but I've outgrown it," said the Colonel, reflectively. "When I was a little lad my mother made a silken coverlet for my trundle-bed and brodered it with pink rosebuds. I thought it very beautiful. I meant to sleep beneath it all my life, but I outgrew the trundle-bed and was obliged to take a high poster in a chamber away from my mother's room. The pretty coverlet would n't fit the larger bed. Well, I learned to sleep without it and without my mother's kisses and my childish prayers; but I have n't forgotten them. Often when I am very weary and depressed, it rests me to think of those things. But enough of that. Childhood is past, and its faiths and its toys are broken. Manhood reconciled me to doubt, and took my faith. 'What man knoweth whence he cometh or whither he goeth?'"

"Sir, you have missed the way of knowledge and gone astray with ignorance, else doubt had not found you. Faith is knowledge. I have knowledge, for I know of a surety that one day I shall be raised to dwell with Him who said, 'And I, if I be lifted

up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.' Come with me into the way of knowledge, Colonel Whitmore."

The Colonel, making no reply, whistled softly as he watched Dan light the sentinel lamp at the far end of the row of cabins.

XXVII.

CUPID'S AFFAIRS.

THE quarantine had been lifted some days before Liberty Despard's death, and another week had gone by since the latter memorable event without bringing any sign of the Horines. But an evening came when, as the Paysons were about to leave the veranda for the night, some one came striding up the driveway, and in a moment Judge Horine had reached the group.

"Have a chair, Judge," said Jerry Payson, after greetings had been exchanged.

"No, thank you. We just got home an hour ago, and I have several things to attend to. I wanted a private word with you, Victory, if agreeable."

"Certainly, Judge. If you don't care to come into the house, I will walk down to the gate with you," replied the girl, thankful that the friendly darkness hid her confusion.

"Victory," said the Judge when they had reached the gate, "you are a sensible girl, and I want you to remember that when it comes to the point I've more real fatherly affection for you than for any other young lady of my acquaintance. You've been

a favorite with me all your life, and I was more than pleased when Eric first told me of your promise to become his wife. Absolutely nothing less than the discovery of your father's ancestry could have brought me to regret my son's choice. But he is my only child, and—it's of no use to beat about the bush—I've forbidden him to marry you, and knowing my principles you understand the importance of his obedience. He is utterly unreasonable and declares his determination to marry you in spite of God, man, or the devil. His defiance has caused serious trouble between us already, and I must depend upon your maidenly pride and modesty to see that my wishes are respected. There is no need to explain further. You comprehend the situation, do n't you?"

"Perfectly, I think. You want me to promise that I will not allow Eric to marry me without your consent," replied Victory, quietly.

"Something to that effect would relieve me of much anxiety."

"Very well, Judge Horine, you have my word of honor that I will never become your daughter-in-law against your will."

"Thank you, my dear. I knew you were a brick. You've got the right quality of sense and spirit," said the man, triumphantly. "And now I want you to go home with me for an hour or so. We brought Eric home from a St. Louis hospital this evening. He has been dangerously ill for weeks. We did n't know how things were going to turn out for a while,

and he is extremely weak yet, scarcely able to stand on his feet; but the moment we got home he tried to dodge his mother and me and come over here to see you. He is n't able to come, and—well, we are obliged to humor his fancies just now, he is so easily excited, so I told him I'd get you to come over there if he'd lie down and behave himself. It's late, I know, but the scamp won't sleep till he sees you. You'll go over with me now, won't you?"

"I think not. I have planned to start South on an extended visit to-morrow morning. It might be wiser for me to go without seeing Eric at all. It would certainly excite him to have me treat him with reserve, and I could only excuse my actions by revealing my promise to you."

"It is n't necessary to mention that just yet, Victory. We will have to humor the boy for awhile. He is desperately weak, and the doctor has warned us against another relapse; he has had one."

"But surely you do n't expect me to allow him to—have you no consideration for my embarrassment, Judge Horine?"

"Of course I realize that your position will be a trifle awkward, but I think, for Eric's sake, you should be willing to meet him the same as usual and leave unpleasant facts to develop later on when he is stronger."

"O, you do? Well, sir, your conception of my *maidenly pride and modesty* is at fault. Since you have put a very delicate matter into my hands to adjust, I must beg that you allow me to retain some

measure of self-respect. I can not visit any young gentleman who is less than my betrothed at this time of night, however ill he may be, in the guise of a sweetheart. Why has Eric not written to me? Was it because of your commands?"

"He could n't have written. He has been too sick—delirious part of the time—and besides, his right arm has been in bandages. But come, Victory, do n't be prudish, I promised to bring you back with me."

"You promised without my consent. I can not go, but I will write a line to Eric. Perhaps that will console him for to-night. Will you wait for it?"

"If it's the best you will do; but I know it won't satisfy Eric. You are unreasonable and stubborn, after all, Victory," grumbled the man.

"Indeed? I wonder if I have the monopoly of those faults," replied the girl, saucily, as she started up the driveway. In a few minutes she returned with an envelope, which she handed the Judge in silence.

"There's nothing disturbing in it, is there?" queried the man, hesitatingly.

"Not a word concerning my promise to you or my relation to Eric."

"All right, then. Eric's weak and easily upset just now."

When Judge Horine reached home, Eric, who was lying on the sitting-room couch, white and wan and with his right arm in a sling, raised himself on his left elbow and asked eagerly:

"Where is Victory, father? Is n't she coming?"

The Judge cleared his throat, and, assuming a carelessness he did not feel, replied:

"The little minx was miffed because you had n't written. She intimated that she felt aggrieved at your silence, or something of that sort. I explained that you had n't been able, and it's all right now, but she thought it rather late to come over to-night. She sent this note, and said you'd have to make out till morning."

With a look of disappointment Eric opened the missive, but after reading its message he sank back on his pillows with a long, deep sigh of relief, and, raising his glad eyes to his father's anxious face, he said tremulously:

"It's all right now, father, is n't it? Thank God!"

"What's all right?" asked the Judge, half fearfully.

"Did n't Victory tell you, sir? Read this."

The light was bright, and Judge Horine was blessed with good eyesight, but he blinked as if he found difficulty in reading the simple message, which was:

"DEAR ERIC,—It was all a mistake about my father. I have n't a drop of Negro blood in my veins. My ancestry is proven exceptionally good. I am so sorry you have been so very sick.

"VICTORY."

"Humph! The minx!" ejaculated the man finally, tossing the note into his wife's lap and striding out of the room and across the road. He found Victory at the gate where he had left her, but the darkness hid her mischievous smiles from him.

"You little hypocrite!" he exclaimed, gruffly, forcibly drawing her through the gateway and along the walk toward his own home. "I've a mind to break your neck! What do you mean by hoodwinking me that way? Why did n't you tell me the truth at once?"

"Have a care, sir! Hands off!" demanded Victory in mock indignation. "I'll have the law on you for kidnaping!"

"I've been authorized to seize you on the grounds of an attachment," retorted the Judge, grimly, "and you need n't ask for grace."

"But I may fine you for violence! And be it known, sir, I'll not be forced into your house and into the presence of your son except on the terms of a compromise!" declared the girl, trying to maintain her aspect of indignation.

"Frame your compromise, fix your own terms, and present your case. I'll agree to instruct the *Judge*, and he'll instruct the jury to favor Eric's suit," answered the man, humorously.

Mrs. Horine was waiting at the hall door, and, when she had kissed Victory and whispered a few regretful words, led her to the sitting-room, and gently pushing her in closed the door that she might meet her eager lover alone.

"Victory! O Victory, my darling?" cried Eric, joyfully.

"Humph!" grunted Judge Horine, sinking into a chair on the porch. "Did you hear that, Madam? It beats the—the—Dutch!"

And so it came to pass that Victory again postponed her visit to her Grandmother Radcliffe.

"You 'd better arrange to go South with Victory in the fall, Eric," said Judge Horine one day soon after their return. "You'll need to browse for a few months before you get down to your law studies."

"You mean—" Eric paused, flushing hotly.

"I mean on a honeymoon vacation, of course."

Victory was not too easily persuaded, but was finally won to the plan, and wrote to her grandmother accordingly. Then, while Eric was growing stronger, she set to work on the delightful task of preparing her trousseau.

One evening late in September the girl found Jerry Payson on the veranda alone, singing, "Just Before the Battle, Mother," with sorrowful quavers in his voice, and cried out gayly:

"Where is my gay old uncle? This mournful fellow reminds me of a graveyard owl!"

"Maybe I do hoot like one, but I don't feel like one, even if I am sort of down in the mouth. I've got a heap to make me happy, but the days seem uncommon long here lately. I was thinking about Hilda. She has n't been over for a day or two, and was looking mighty peaked and bad the last time I

saw her. I reckon she's fretting some for Liberty. I wish you'd go over after supper and see if she's well and what she's up to these days. Will you, Victory?"

"Why, to be sure I will, Uncle Jerry!" cried the girl, smilingly. It was nearly dark, however, before she was at liberty to keep her promise. Slipping out on the veranda quietly she found Jerry Payson dozing in his chair, and asked softly as she bent over him:

"Are you asleep, Uncle Jerry?"

"I reckon not just now," was the startled reply. "Is Hilda well, Victory?"

"I have n't been over yet. I'm going now, and thought perhaps you would n't mind going with me."

"O glory, I would n't mind it a bit!" exclaimed the man, eagerly.

Miss Lane was sitting by the cottage window in the darkness, thinking of Robert and Liberty, when she heard her callers coming, and cried:

"Sakes alive, is that you fetching Jerry over, Victory? Why, what's going to happen? Will you come into the house, or shall I bring some rocking chairs out on the porch?"

"It would be a heap of trouble to hist me into the house, chair and all, would n't it?" asked the old soldier, insinuatingly.

"Not a mitel!" declared Miss Lane, hastening out. "You take a good hold on that side, Victory. There, that was n't any trick! I'll go ahead and

light a lamp. Just wheel Jerry right into the sitting-room, Victory."

"What's your parlor for, Hilda? Do you keep it for Lem Hall? I saw him coming away from here the other day."

"I was n't here to see him, Jerry, so I reckon he did n't get into my parlor. But, sakes alive, Victory, do wheel Jerry into the parlor. I'll fetch the lamp in there," retorted the woman, bustling away.

"Why, Uncle Jerry! You've left your manners at home, have n't you?" cried Victory, merrily.

"I reckon maybe I did. I wish you'd run home and get them. If you're back here by half after nine it'll be plenty soon," was the unblushing reply.

Miss Lane was out of hearing, but Victory's laughter rang out like sweet music as she declared:

"All right, sir, I'll go home! But as for coming back—I'll think about that! You'll have to wait till the spirit moves me."

Miss Lane came in with the lamp presently, and was a trifle embarrassed to find Jerry Payson alone.

"How is Andy getting on now-days?" she questioned, confusedly.

"Just tolerable. It is n't Andy I've got on my mind to-night, Hilda."

"Well, I'm glad he's up and about all the time. He coughs mighty bad yet, I notice. I was thinking of Robert and Liberty when you came. I miss Liberty more than I can say; but of course I would n't ask to have her back. She died happy and contented, and that's a great comfort to me."

"I reckon so, Hilda; but I'm afraid you're fretting for her. You've nothing particular to keep you at the cottage now, and—that light's brighter'n common, is n't it? Could n't you put it out in the other room? It sort of hurts my eyes."

"Sakes alive! why did n't you say so, Jerry?"

"Well, I have said it now. Thanky, that's a heap more comfortable. Fetch your rocking chair up closer, Hilda."

"I'm tolerable close now," faltered the woman, nervously.

"But you're too far off for me to touch. O glory, come closer!" urged the man, coaxingly.

"Sakes alive, Jerry, I can hear plenty good right here."

"Maybe so, but—I wanted to ask you something particular. I reckon I'd best have staid home."

"What is it you want to know, Jerry?" asked Miss Lane, softly, after a short silence.

"It's about that gold ring. Would you have been wearing it when I came home from the army if I had n't been all shot to pieces, and Andy had n't held it back from you? Would you, Hilda??"

"Yes, I would have worn it in spite of everything—*everything*—Jerry, if I had got hold of it."

"O glory! If I could just move over where you are, Hilda! Come closer, won't you? Or have you got past what you felt for me then?"

"I take it, love of the right sort do n't get past itself, no matter what comes to pass."

"I take it that way, too; but maybe yours for me

has got free from hindering things a mite too late. Is it too late for you to wear that ring for what it meant when I sent it to you, Hilda?"

"Sakes alive, Jerry, I—I don't know as it is."

"Well, if you love me yet as I do you, and you feel willing to wear that ring, just move up closer, Hilda."

There was a move in the dim parlor, and Jerry Payson's outreaching hand found the one it was searching for. "Just a mite closer, Hilda," he whispered, and when she was nearer he let go of her hand and caught her around the shoulders.

"Dear me, Uncle Jerry!" cried Victory from the doorway an hour later, "did Aunt Hilda make you sit in this dark parlor?"

"Dark? Why, it's about the lightest place I ever got into! O glory, it's plenty light, is n't it, Hilda? 'T is n't time for me to go home yet, is it?"

"It's ten o'clock, and that's time for all good boys to be in bed, is n't it?"

"Shucks! take me home then. I hate to go, though. Fetch in that lamp, Victory. I want to take a good look at Hilda. She's promised to adopt me to-morrow."

"Sakes alive, Jerry! You know that is n't so!" declared the woman.

"Well, maybe it was n't to-morrow, but it's bound to be soon."

"O I'm so glad for both of you!" cried Victory, delightedly. "I heard what Andy said that day when he thought he was dying. Grandma told me

to stay handy in case I should be needed, but I sat in the hall. I had never imagined your affection for each other before that, and I've been longing for things to get straightened out between you ever since."

"Things are straight now for good and all," said the old soldier, who was drawing his beloved flag across his body, as if to hide its imperfections from the woman he loved, before the light came in. "Can I come over in the morning, Hilda?"

"I reckon not, Jerry. I promised Sam I'd drive out there, and I won't get back until noon. You can come in the afternoon, if that'll do."

"I s'pose it'll have to; but, O glory! it's a long time till to-morrow afternoon. But I'll have things fixed handier in a few days."

"It'll have to be weeks, Jerry. I've got duties to the living yet, and Liberty's will to carry out in the giving away of her things. We can wait awhile yet, and be happy at the same time."

Half way up the driveway Victory paused, and stooping over her uncle pressed her warm, young lips to his brow. "Uncle Jerry," she said, with a quiver in her voice, "I'm so happy over your happiness. I think yours and Aunt Hilda's love story is the most beautiful one I know, except Eric's and mine."

"Love is a queer contraption, Victory," replied the man, solemnly. "It's easy to get into; but there do n't appear to be any way to get out again."

"Who wants out?" asked the girl, softly. And

the pair passed on up the shadowy aisle and into the shelter of the old mansion.

On her way to the farm next morning Miss Lane met Lem Hall, who drew up his team for a chat. After the usual courtesies, Mr. Hall asked:

"Will you be back home before noon, Hilda?"

"It 'll be about noon. Why so?"

"I had laid out to call and see you. I was there the other day, but did n't find you at home. I'm on the hunt of a wife, Hilda."

"So I thought when I saw you going to see Betty Bigelow so regular."

"I guess Betty's a good enough woman and all that," said the man, coloring and shuffling at the halters at his feet.

"Yes, she is so. If ever she marries, I hope she 'll get a good man and one that's got the feeling and sense to make love to her like she was a young girl. She's got a hungry heart and notions of love-making, even if she is an old maid."

"Is it *Betty* you mean, Hilda? or do you feel that way yourself?"

"It's *Betty* I mean. I take it you'd have more sense than to come to my house on the hunt of a wife, Lem."

"I ought to have for a fact, Hilda. You sent me about my business twice when I was younger and better looking than I am now. But there's no fool like the old fool, you know. I'd be willing to try again if it would do any good."

"But it would n't. I meant what I said the first

time you asked me. It could n't be any different if you asked me a hundred times."

"That's the Lane stubbornness in you, Hilda."

"Sakes alive, maybe it is. Call it that if you want to. I wish you well, Lem; but I must be driving on now. Good-bye."

Late in the afternoon, when Jerry Payson had gone home from his visit at the cottage, Miss Betty Bigelow ran across the road with beaming countenance.

"My, O my, Hilda! I thought Jerry Payson never would go home. What possessed him to stay here the whole enduring afternoon, and me a dying to come over and tell you a secret?"

"Sakes alive, Betty, if you'd got at me sooner you would n't have the pleasure of telling it now. What is it?"

"Well, I was sitting piecing away on my red and green quilt, when who should walk up to the door but Lem Hall. 'Good morning, Betty!' he said, and I said, 'Good morning, Lem; come in, won't you?' Well, he looked at me curious like, and I felt to see if my collar was fastened, and it was. I had on my purple wrapper and looked nicer than common, I guess. 'Take a seat, won't you, Lem?' says I. I hate to tell it, Hilda, but—well, Lem said: 'I believe I will, Betty; but you'll have to sit on my lap and name our wedding-day!' And then he grabbed me, and—O my, I was that scared I nearly fell to pieces. I do n't know what I said, but the next thing I was sitting on Lem's knees,

and he was—O my, I can't tell the rest, Hilda, it makes me feel so silly."

"I reckon you sent such a fellow as that about his business, did n't you?" asked Miss Lane, dryly.

"Why—O, you 're just in fun, are n't you? But Lem did n't act a bit cold-blooded to-day. Why, he acts like he worships me now. When I hung off about naming the day he said: 'I won't wait long, Betty. I love you like blazes; but I won't stand any offishness.' I can see now just how it was when he was courting Sally and Hester. I s'pose he was just that desperate with them. Won't my quilts and things come in handy now, Hilda?"

"They will so, Betty."

"I wish you had a chance to get married, Hilda."

"Well, I reckon I ought to tell you my secret, Betty. I am going to get married soon."

"Why, Hilda Lane! Who to?"

"To Jerry Payson, the only man I ever could have married."

"My, O my!" ejaculated Miss Betty, staring across the street blankly. "I would n't swap with you, Hilda," she added, presently.

"Nor me with you, Betty. I'd rather have Jerry, just as he is, than any other man in the whole world."

"My, my! would you, Hilda? O, my, my!"

"Yes, I would, Betty," declared Miss Lane, gently.

XXVIII.

FELICITIES.

NOVEMBER was an eventful month to the inmates of the four dwellings clustered about the old Payson corner-stone. First of all, Miss Betty Bigelow's marriage was pleasantly celebrated in her own cozy home, and was a surprise to most of her acquaintances; but her belated romance was quickly overshadowed by the splendor of the wedding of Victory Radcliffe and Eric Horine, which took place a few days later.

The young couple were extremely popular, and the vague rumor that had gotten abroad concerning Eric's illness, from which he was so slowly recovering his strength, lent a charm to the affair. The pair were to go South for a time, and it was hoped that Eric would soon regain his former vigor.

Naturally the old Payson place became the focus for all eyes and interests for days before the wedding, and never in its varied history had the house shone with such beauty or been the scene of an event so important to the society of Payson Bend. The ceremony was set for eight o'clock in the evening, and when the hour arrived the house was ablaze with light and thronged with guests, who found the pleasure of the occasion heightened by the discovery

of the consummation of another unsuspected romance.

True, a whisper had gotten abroad at nightfall hinting at an unannounced wedding which had taken place at Miss Lane's cottage at high noon of the same day; but the report had not circulated freely, although it was not without proper foundation. It was indeed true that, in the presence of their immediate associates, Jerry Payson and Hilda Lane had quietly taken the vows of wedlock. Victory had not pleaded in vain to have the rite pronounced before her departure for the South.

After the Payson house was deserted of its many wedding guests late that night, and the bridal party were on their way Southward, Andy Peters lingered in the sitting-room, where Jerry Payson and Hilda were enjoying the firelight, and planting himself before the two he had once so cruelly wronged, he said:

"Jerry, time was when I'd 've knocked the day-lights out of you before I'd 've let you marry Hilda; but now I'm as happy as a bumble-bee in a clover patch. It makes me feel like yelling what you're always shouting, Jerry, just to see you and Hilda sitting here man and wife for the rest of your enduring days. It's no use to chaw over the words I said when I was nigh kicking the bucket. I asked you both to forgive what I'd done against you then, and you did. I've had bad luck and the world's been against me considerable; but I reckon it's as Hilda's always said, I've been against the world

and myself to boot. I've had peace in my mind, though, ever since I made a clean breast of things, and I've been getting along in the way of happiness till—O lordy, I don't believe it would rile me much if Betty Bigelow was to trot up and poke one of her tarnal bokays in my face this minute. But I've got something on my mind I want to say right now:

"Hilda, Liberty's off your hands for good and all now; Robert's down South following his own bent, and the Ritchies are company for themselves; so I reckon you're about shut of your old adoptions, and Jerry's the only new one you've got. I reckon you won't let me do much for Jerry any more; but you'll need a chore boy round the place, and—I can't abear to go away—I wish you'd adopt me along with Jerry."

"Sakes alive, Andy. I'm willing for you to stay right on here, same as ever. I s'posed you would. Jerry's the one to say about that."

"O glory, Andy, I never thought of turning you off," said Jerry Payson, feelingly. "I reckon Hilda never thought of adopting me without you. But 'tween you and me, Andy, we're about the worst adoptions she ever tackled. No, no, old boy, I don't 'low to give you up while I live. We'll all hang together, you and me and Hilda and Peggy, till we're taken over to Crown Hill one after t' other. Shake hands on that, old boy, and don't fret any more. We've got plenty of room, and you're mighty welcome."

"Thanky, Jerry. Thanky, Hilda," mumbled Andy, quickly turning and hobbling out of the room to hide his tears of gratitude.

"There's been a powerful change in Andy lately, Hilda," said Jerry Payson. "Getting nigh to death sort of set his wits to working, I reckon."

"'T was n't getting nigh to death, so much as getting nigh to God, that's made the change in him, Jerry. He was brought to his knees when he'd near about killed you, and when he was close to the grave himself he come to the last point of stubbornness, and gave up that God was at the head of things in spite of things. He's shoved Ardy Peters and the niggers away from the windows of his soul, and now he sees the world in the way God meant him to from the start. I never told you what Andy said when he came over to see Liberty in her coffin. He was mightily broken up, and says he: 'Hilda, I reckon God don't work by the "survival of the fittest" rule, or he would have let Liberty survive in place of me. I'm an old man, and never done as much good in my whole life as Liberty in a little span.' I was broken up too, Jerry; but I said: 'Andy, God has rules we can't judge. Maybe He saw that Liberty was fittest for heaven, and was kind enough to leave you yet awhile, and give you a chance to get fitter than you are.'"

"What did Andy say to that, Hilda?" asked Jerry Payson, with emotion.

"He said, 'God A'mighty, have mercy on my wicked soul!' and then he went away crying fit to

kill," replied the woman, rising and going to the south window, a trifle overwrought.

"Come back and sit down again, Hilda," said Jerry, sympathetically. "It's mighty pleasant to think you do n't have to go across to the cottage at the end of our evening visits any more. It's pleasant just to know we're going to spend the balance of our days under one roof."

"It is so, Jerry," responded the woman, dreamily. "It's dark over at the cottage. I can barely make out the edges of the roof against the sky. I'll never forget that I raised Robert and Liberty over there, but I'm glad I got a good price for the place as long as I do n't need it for a home any more."

"I hated to have you sell it, Hilda. I'll hate to see other folks moving in and living there."

"Well, I do n't feel that way. I do n't begrudge it to the good folks that bought it. I'll be happy to see them getting the good of the fruit and flowers, and I am glad of the money the place brought for the mission fund. That, with Liberty's thousand, and what I'd laid by to help her through college with, made an even five thousand. I wish it was more; but I could n't do any better without selling some of the land, and I do n't feel that it would be right to do that just now. I 'low to leave the land to be divided even between Sam and Susy and Robert after I'm gone. I want to treat all my adoptions fair, so they'll have no call to feel hurt."

"You've done a good part by your adoptions, Hilda; and as for the mission fund you gave a plenty. I never told you that two thousand of what

I gave was money I had tied up for Liberty. You know I told you I had n't forgot what Rhody Despard did for one of my blood. Well, that and the other two thousand I gave was pension money savings. I've been a long time getting the money together, but I don't begrudge a cent of it. I want you should know the secrets of my heart, Hilda. Down deep in my soul I do n't love the niggers like brothers; but I feel for them and I want to help them along for God's sake, for their own sake, for Liberty's and Robert's sake, and, most of all, for the sake of my hero, Abraham Lincoln! Hooray for Abraham Lincoln and the Stars and Stripes!"

"You've never got over being a soldier, Jerry. I do n't want you should, either. It does seem that things are getting settled down in the best way to make folks happy all round. It's plainer every day that God's at the head of things. Sakes alive, Jerry, who would ever have thought that the time would come when Mr. Hodge would start a mission fund for the colored folks, and head it with half of all he's got? or that Judge Horine would give what he did, or Andy be brought to give the heft of his savings to the same thing?"

"Yes, it is past understanding how things are brought to pass. But it is n't much stranger about Mr. Hodge and the Judge and Andy, than it is about the whole of Payson Bend. I reckon the whole town is proud of the fine lot of money they've raised for a living monument to Liberty and her prayers. I'm of a mind with you that God's at the head of things, Hilda; but it's plain to me that you're at

the bottom of what we've all done for the Negroes. If it had n't been for you and your good heart, who would have adopted Robert and Liberty and raised them to be what you did? And if it had n't been for what Robert and Liberty proved to Payson Bend of the worth of the colored race, how would the folks about here have been stirred to do what they did? I believe the whole lot of Negroes that will be helped year after year with the interest of our mission fund, will have their names written in heaven as 'Hilda Lane's Adoptions.'"

"Do n't give me too much credit, Jerry," said Hilda, tremulously. "I could n't have adopted Robert and Liberty if God had n't put them into my hands, and I could n't have raised them to be what they got to be, if God had n't stood by me and helped me day after day. I never had a trial but what it was made plain to me that things might have been a heap worse, and never a day that I did n't feel sure that God was at the head of things and knew how to bring things out of the kinks the best way."

"Well, in my judgment the good of a body's work do n't end on the day it's done—not when it comes to adoptions, anyhow. There are blessings piling up for you in heaven, Hilda, and you'll hear tell of your adoptions over yonder by 'n' by."

"I've had my pay right along day after day, Jerry, and more than my share of blessings; and now that God has straightened out the muddle of things 'twixt us, and let us get together to love one

t'other without hindrance the rest of our days, there would n't be room in my cup for many more drops of happiness."

"You've earned all you've had or got, Hilda. I wish I was worth what you'll be to me; you deserve a better match. But you'll have to take the flag in place of my right arm, and love the Union more for the rest that's lacking in me."

"Hush, Jerry. I've taken you for what you were to me that night before you went to the army, and for what you've been to me from that night on."

"You're one of the steady sort, Hilda. I mind what I said to Victory once: 'Love's a great contraption,' and when it comes to the love of a woman like you for a fellow like me, it's past the understanding of mortals. But it's no use to sit here arguing; I've got the best of the bargain, that's plain a plenty. O glory, I think I have!"

"We won't quarrel about who's got the best bargain. We've both got just what we wanted. I reckon God saw this day coming and kept the heft of our happiness for the time we'd need it worst. I s'pose there is n't much in this world worth having that we have n't had our share of some time or other, and the last is best of all."

"That's how I take it. Some of our joys have been taken from our hands, but we've got heaps of blessings left, besides each other and the Stars and Stripes," replied the old soldier, tenderly. "Come closer, Hilda. Let's sing, 'My Country, 't is of Thee.'"

XXIX.

RECOGNITION.

It was Christmas Eve, or rather Christmas morning, for the mantel clock was ticking off the small hours in the library, where Robert Lane sat with face buried in his hands and elbows resting on the table. Within the circle of light falling from the shaded lamp an open letter lay where he had pushed it aside an hour before. A door opened with a creak, and Colonel Whitmore emerged from his private apartment.

"Young man, you are troubled!" he exclaimed, with fatherly solicitude. "Let me share your burden."

"I beg your pardon if I have disturbed your rest, sir," replied Robert, lifting his head. "I should have retired."

"I have n't slept yet, but that is n't your fault. I have been thinking of our Negroes and your growing influence over them. They never knew the meaning of Christmas Eve until to-night. That wonderful tree, though laden with simple gifts, was thoroughly enjoyed, and your talk while exhibiting those beautiful pictures of the Christ Child will never be forgotten. But you have overexerted your-

self, I fear, and taxed your purse far too heavily, my friend."

"I had ample reward in the delight of my poor brothers. I am more than satisfied with the progress they have made during my labor with them."

"You have reason to be. They are coming to regard you as a veritable prince of light."

"I am content with any measure of their affection. But it is near morning. I will go to bed. Please return to your rest, Colonel."

"When I've shared your trouble, my friend," insisted the elder man, laying his long slim fingers on Robert's head caressingly.

Without further parley Robert picked up the open letter and handed it to Colonel Whitmore, who put on his glasses and read it with careful attention. When he had finished he asked:

"Who is this Captain Bruce?"

"He is a resident of Payson Bend—a relic of the Civil War, and a fine old gentleman. His daughter was my promised wife for a few weeks just prior to the time I discovered my—"

"I understand. You released her."

"Yes, sir. She was away from home, but I wrote explaining my position and setting her free. She refused her release by return mail, and requested an interview before I left for the South, but I couldn't trust myself to meet her. She would have generously tempted me to a speedy marriage for the sake of comforting me, and I realized how weak I was in my desolate frame of mind. And

her father had told me that he would never consent to the connection. I wrote again after I reached here, declaring that I would never accept the sacrifice she might be willing to make for the sake of our love, and believing me firm she then pleaded to continue our correspondence as friends. I have since gathered from her letters that she is reconciled to our separation. But you have read the Captain's letter. He says that Flossie is cheerful and uncomplaining; but that he, being quite old and feeble and near the grave, feels that he was wrong to interfere with his daughter's happiness. And so, without letting her know of his intention, he has written to recall his objection to our union. He asks me to visit them as soon as convenient."

"Are you greatly attached to the girl?"

"Attached, sir? I have loved her for years! To call her wife—to take her pure young life into my care was the dream of my youth, the hope of my manhood!" exclaimed Robert, passionately.

"Ah, I see, my friend," murmured the Colonel, sympathetically. "But now, what shall you do?"

"Colonel Whitmore," said Robert, rising and regarding his friend searchingly, "I asked you a question once which you evaded. I will ask it again: If you had a daughter who loved me and whom I loved, would you give her to me in marriage?"

There was a flicker in the Colonel's keen, dark eyes. A tremor shook his lashes and flashed over the muscles of his face. He laid down the letter,

put his glasses in their case, and stood up, facing Robert as he replied with impressive candor:

"Robert, my friend, I think I love you almost as I might have loved a worthy son. I believe you are a man of truth and lofty purpose. I would intrust you with my honor, my life. But if I had a daughter, a fair, God-given creature of my flesh and bone, I could not break the sacred law of race purity by giving her to you in wedlock. Forgive me that I must wound you with a truth."

"Your action is proper, sir, and I thank you for your honesty and words of friendship," replied Robert, bravely, but with tense lines about lips and nostrils. "I shall never marry."

"Ah, you are yet young; do not speak hastily. I have not advised you against marriage."

"No, I have decided for myself. You have justified my decision regarding Flossie Bruce. I feel as you do. I shall write Captain Bruce, and ask him to refrain from mentioning our correspondence. His daughter is reconciled to friendship. I shall not take the advantage offered me."

"But you will meet cultured women of your own caste in the future, no doubt. Do not take the vows of celibacy. It is an inhuman condition."

"Not more inhuman than to father children cursed with racial taint. I shall never be faithless to my love for Flossie Bruce. I shall seek my recompense in labor for my Master."

"You are courageous, young man. But hearken! Life is a cold and barren experience shorn of the

caressing tenderness of woman's love and companionship. She is the one perfect guerdon of man's desires. His innate craving for domestic felicity finds neither content nor solace in any abode unblest with the peculiar association of his natural complement. We were created so—man first, then woman to supply his deficiency.”

Robert made no reply. He was gazing out of the curtainless window with unseeing eyes. Colonel Whitmore, standing beside him, peered into the blackness without.

“It is very dark,” he said. “But it is always so just before the dawn. The day is at hand, my young friend, be comforted.”

“I know the Comforter, sir,” replied Robert, smilingly, “and I am not dismayed. The day is indeed at hand, and rare opportunities for doing good await me.”

“I had thought to lift your burden somewhat, but I have been forced to add to its sternness instead,” said the Colonel, sadly, turning to his desk and taking a document from it.

“Not so. All that mortal could do to help me you have done, sir. I had donned my armor and set my face battleward. You but buckled my armor the more securely. Who could do more?”

“Ah, but who could have done less with honesty, my valiant soldier? But hold! there is the law of compensation that cheers our trials and rewards our endeavors. Christmas is at hand. Here is a gift in trust for the cause you have championed. It is

a deed by which I have conveyed to you the half of my plantation, that you may found upon it a refuge and training-school for the outcasts of the race you wish to serve. The settlement buildings and equipment are included in the gift, so that the crops may be continued and cared for without immediate outlay. All control of the property lies with you. Do what you will. I have implicit confidence in you. You will fear that I have impoverished myself. Not so. I have a purchaser for the stretch of fallow land beyond the cotton fields, and what it brings will insure my comfort for the balance of my life. I am an old man."

"Sir, your magnanimity overcomes me!" exclaimed Robert, warmly. "God will surely repay you!"

"Ah, God owes me nothing. He has long despaired of getting tribute from me. This may be a peace offering through you. But no, on second thought He can not so regard this gift, since I give it, not for His sake alone, but to salve my conscience when I think of the gang I've used to my purpose, and for your sake since you are Dorothy's grandson and the Major's. And not only for your kin to them, but for the courage of your heart and the confidence of your soul do I humor your labors and indulge your extravagant hopes. But enough of that. Get you to bed, young man. You have scarcely time to warm your pillow till the glare of day will be upon you."

A night or two later Robert and the Colonel,

having returned from the plantation through a chill wind, were lingering before a pine-knot fire for a chat before retiring, when a heavy step on the porch was followed by a sharp rap on the door.

"Ho, Colonel!" exclaimed Rupert Radcliffe when the door was opened to admit him.

"Ho, yourself! A midnight caller!" retorted the Colonel. "You're abroad with the owls, are n't you, Rupert?"

"Owls? No. It was a raven that sat on my hearth to-night, croaking like a black fiend from the plutonian shore for a fact. It screamed the old refrain on the night wind that drove me over here with the marrow freezing in my bones!"

"Ah, be seated and take a breath. You speak in riddles. What's the joke,—snakes or hoodoos?"

"Snakes? Dry chance for snakes! Jinny found my jug and emptied it down her red gullet before dusk. I caught her in the act, and I had nothing but black coffee to wash the bacon grease out of my throat after I'd eaten."

"Bad luck, indeed. Sit down, sit down, and I'll brew a mint julep."

"I'll take it later," said the man, striding about the room with his eyes bent upon Robert.

"Better sit down, Rupert," urged the Colonel, uneasily, noting his visitor's unusual excitement.

"Sit down yourself, Colonel. Do n't stand on ceremony with me. Ho, young Northerner! What's your name?"

Robert glanced up at his questioner composedly.

"We have met several times, sir. You know that my name is Robert Lane."

"So you say. There's no lack of names. What is your father's name?"

"Sir!" exclaimed Robert, rising and facing the man, with blazing eyes, "by what authority do you presume to taunt me thus?"

"By the word of my black wench, Jinny, who, too drunk to hold her tongue, sat on my hearth to-night and croaked off a tale Chloe heard told in this very room not long ago. Ho, these niggers beat the old Nick himself at eaves-dropping. Name your father, young Northerner!"

"Name him yourself, sir!"

For a moment the two men stared at each other, and then Rupert Radcliffe whirled toward the Colonel.

"Look, he is like my father, Colonel!" he said. "And he is like his mother, Patra Dunbar, too."

"Yes, I have noticed those resemblances."

"He is my son!"

"Without doubt. I wish he were mine."

"Ho, good enough!" cried the man, tearing off his gloves and flinging them on the floor beside his hat. "Young blood, your father's name is Rupert Radcliffe! Shake on it!"

"And what was my mother to you, sir?" asked Robert, ignoring the proffered hand.

"Ho, that's the rub, is it? It's not enough that I own you, *my son*?"

"No, sir!"

"Well, then, your mother was my first wife. She deserted me a few weeks before your birth. I divorced her afterwards. It is n't difficult for a white man to divorce a negress."

"So it appears. Your laws are elastic when they encircle a white man, but they are iron when they bind a Negro," said Robert, bitterly. "But your contract with my mother was not void till her desertion of you made it voidable. You falsified when you told her it was."

"Ho, what 're you after?"

"Nothing. I ask nothing of the Radcliffes—neither name nor other recognition."

"Your grandmother has a fine spread of land. You should share it with my brother Jason's daughter."

"I make no claim. I wish my grandmother and my Cousin Victory to remain in ignorance of my relation to them."

"You still refuse to take my hand, do you?" asked Rupert, sadly.

"To what end?" faltered Robert, impressed with the sudden change that had come over the man. "If for friendship only—I do not wish to live at enmity with any one—my friendship is for your refusal."

"I'll take what you'll give. Your hand on friendship, then."

"On your word to refrain from exposing your former relation to my mother, who is coming to make a home for me at the settlement."

"Ho, and let the name of Radcliffe die out?"

"Would you wish to perpetuate the Radcliffe family through me, sir?"

"Ho, the fiends!" groaned the man, dropping into a chair and with his elbows on his knees cradling his forehead in his hands.

"Robert is right, Rupert," interposed Colonel Whitmore. "The Radcliffes came of noble lineage. No man can honorably father two races. Better let the name die out than continue it through a degenerating posterity."

"Ho, Robert is a truer Radcliffe than I, who was born a thoroughbred. And he is a better man!" declared Rupert Radcliffe, picking up his hat and gloves.

"Yes, in spite of your sin being visited upon him, he is a truer Radcliffe and a better man than you, Rupert; but that does not cleanse his blood of its taint. Enough of that. Wait, wait, Rupert! The shadows are thick outside, and your heart is full of sorrow. It is cheery here; wait in the firelight and I will brew the mint-julep."

"Ho, you know my lame foot! I'll wait for the julep. Jinny is drunk—the hearth is black—and only the fiendish raven will be there to greet me. I'll wait for the julep, but make it stout, and the fiends take the raven!"

When the Colonel had left the room Robert approached his father, and said softly:

"Here is my hand, sir; we have need of each other; let us be friends."

"Ho, as father and son, I'd give—but I hear the raven croak. Yes, I'll take what you'll give. What can I do for you? I've little enough but sins, God knows. Still if I've aught you covet, it shall be yours!"

"I covet your greatest gift for my men. Come with me to the settlement as often as you can, and bring your violin. Let my brothers feel the transport of your music as I have felt it. When you weave your spells with string and bow, I feel the thrill of kindred ties and my soul beholds in your eyes dim visions of paradise beyond the cypress groves of earth. At *such* time we shall be father and son."

"Then I will go with you often, often, my—my son," whispered Rupert Radcliffe, huskily.

In the meantime Eric Horine and Victory had spent several weeks at the old Radcliffe mansion. Its proud mistress, delighted with her young relatives and aroused by the prospect of brighter days, seemed to have taken a new lease on life. Recognizing Victory as her heir, she set about trying to persuade the young couple to remain on the plantation, proposing to give them full control and asking for herself only a home and support while she lived.

Victory, fascinated with the South, was easily persuaded. She longed to restore the mansion to some semblance of its olden grandeur, and if possible retrieve the Radcliffe fortunes. But Eric, lack-

ing funds and foreseeing many difficulties, besides having ambitions remote from life on a plantation, for which he had neither taste nor fitness, declined to consider the proposition. The old lady was disappointed, but found some consolation in Victory's promise to visit her often, and a short time after the return of the young couple to the North a fresh discovery claimed her attention.

The next morning after his late visit at Colonel Whitmore's, Rupert Radcliffe rapped at his mother's door for the first time in many years.

"What brings you here, Rupert?" she asked, suspiciously. "I have no money to give you."

"Ho, wait till I ask for money, mother. I've come to speak of my son."

"Your son? Your children are dead."

"My eldest son lives. He was born of Patra Dunbar a few weeks after her flight from here."

"What is the offspring of Patra Dunbar to me? Your relation with her was illegal."

"I chose to pronounce it so. The bond was legal enough on the face of it. I acted the dog, mother; but you drove me to it."

"Indeed! Did you ever act other than the dog, Rupert?"

"Ho, I did n't come here to quarrel, mother, nor to ask a bone for myself. I came to inform you of a fact you would do well to consider. My son refuses the name of Radcliffe, and asks neither recognition nor favor of us. But I wanted you to know about him. He is like my father."

"The Major? Impossible!" declared the old lady, scornfully.

"So it would seem. See him for yourself; but mind, his relation to the family is his secret and mine, not yours. I have trespassed upon his wishes in this confidence."

"Where is your son, and what name does he bear?"

"You have heard of him often enough, I'll wager, from Jason's daughter and her husband, and from Colonel Whitmore. He is known as Robert Lane."

"Robert Lane? Robert Lane?" questioned the old lady, excitedly. "Not the Colonel's *protégé*—that kingly young fellow whom he adores?"

"The same Robert Lane!"

"Then I must see him! I invited him to come with the Colonel to dinner while Victory and Eric were here, but he declined. I shall ask the two to dine with me to-night. Call Dosie and Jas."

"Have a care. I hold you to silence. Besides, Robert goes to the plantation every evening."

"Then they shall lunch with me to-morrow noon."

And so it transpired, for the Colonel, receiving a private message from Mrs. Radcliffe, prevailed upon Robert to accept the invitation. After her guests had departed Mrs. Radcliffe sent for her son, and when he came reached out her trembling hands in welcome, crying:

"Rupert, Rupert, for the sake of the Major's grandson I forgive your sins against me! Come home, my son, let us live in peace. Come home, and while I live you shall be master of the plantation."

"But after your death? Who shall inherit the property?"

"You shall divide it with Jason's daughter, and your son shall be your heir."

XXX.

HEARTENING PROSPECTS.

THE last week of the year was one of importance at the Whitmore plantation. The cotton was being marketed, and the Negroes were anticipating New-Year's day as the time when a final estimate of the year's expenses would be deducted from the returns of the enormous crop and the profits divided.

Robert had told the gang of Colonel Whitmore's generous gift and its purpose, briefly outlining his plan for the establishment of a training station on Christmas-day. On each subsequent evening he had entered more and more fully into the details of his project, hoping to enthuse the men and win their voluntary decision to remain at the settlement as co-workers in the establishment of the school, continuing their studies as the original class and beneficiaries of the institution.

Robert Lane received a bulky envelope the day before New-Year's. It contained a formal notice that the citizens of Payson Bend had subscribed, and properly invested, the sum of eighty thousand dollars as a memorial to the name of Liberty Despard, the benefit being designated as the "Liberty Despard Mission Fund," and dedicated to the ad-

vancement of the American Negro, spiritually and educationally. The delighted young missionary was furthermore informed that the annual interests of the fund would be paid into his hands for disbursement, according to the terms of the accompanying document, so long as he labored as a benefactor of the colored race. A number of letters and resolutions from various citizens and societies of Payson Bend, extending expressions of encouragement and commendation of his chosen work, were included in the envelope with the formal announcement of the gift, and were extremely gratifying to the recipient.

The timely provision was a Godsend, and relieved Robert of much anxiety as well as leaving him free to devote his entire time to the work whose possibilities were now furnished with a solid basis, and whose prospects were full of promise.

But of all the good fortune so wonderfully crowning Robert Lane's prayers and labors, perhaps none was more gratifying or prophetic of blessed results than the evidence of aroused ambition and loyalty given by the gang he had so unselfishly served.

The Negroes received their portions of the harvest at noon on New-Year's day, and spent the afternoon in coming to a decision as to their immediate course. They had been formally released from every obligation, and were free to go at will; but Robert had asked them to remain in a body until after the program he had prepared for the evening. And to that end the empty warehouse, which had

been used for an assembly room since the cold weather had set in, was lighted and occupied earlier than usual.

After a short, miscellaneous program Robert told the story of Liberty Despard's life and desire to benefit her race, dwelling upon her faith and consecration, and making it plain that her influence had been the inspiration that won the magnificent benefit which he then proceeded to explain, under its term, as the "Liberty Despard Mission Fund."

The Negroes were visibly affected by the well-told story; but it is probable that Dan and Nero had previously exerted sufficient influence to shape the course of the gang. Be that as it may, Robert had scarcely closed his address when Dan, acting as spokesman, sprang up and explained that the gang, with the exception of one man, had decided to remain at the settlement for another year as field laborers and helpers in the establishment of the new school, and as members of a night class or other session, upon whatever terms Robert Lane might dictate. Hardly able to wait till Dan's talk was finished, the Negroes of one accord crowded around Robert, to heap in his hands the bits of blue paper which represented their individual shares in the harvest. It was their free-will offering toward the new enterprise.

Deeply moved at this yielding of their all to the cause they had so lately learned to love, Robert commended the generosity of the men, and proposed the investment of their combined gift in the construc-

tion of a comfortable dormitory, with bathroom attached, for their especial use so long as they remained on the premises. The idea of appropriating so much luxury rather amazed the Negroes at first, but they were easily led to consent to the plan, and Robert promised to prepare estimates immediately so that the building might be erected at once.

Ham, the one exception to the general agreement, had announced his intention to leave the plantation with Loozy as soon as he was released; but Robert persuaded the pair to be properly married before going away. To that end Colonel Whitmore brought a minister out to the settlement to perform the ceremony at the close of the evening's entertainment. It was ten o'clock when the rite was pronounced. The Negroes were in a hilarious mood, and it was difficult to restrain them during the sacred ceremony. For that "Ham's gwinter take up wid dat fool Loozy" was to them a plain and amusing fact, which the solemn words of the minister neither altered nor emphasized.

It is likely that the newly-wedded pair would have met with some embarrassments in leaving the settlement had not Rupert Radcliffe made the way of their escape easy by holding the gang spellbound for an hour or more after the ceremony with his violin.

When Colonel Whitmore, the minister, Robert, and Rupert Radcliffe were driving homeward in the ancient coach at the close of the evening's various happenings, the latter said:

"I've been up to the capital again, Colonel."

"To what purpose?" questioned the colonel, quickly.

"I spent the night with our friend, the governor. Ho, what think you?"

"Success!"

"To the tune of an appropriation for Robert's school, which will be forthcoming in the future."

"Thank you, sir!" exclaimed Robert, fervently, returning the tender pressure of his father's hand, which had sought his in the dark. "As my foster mother, Hilda Lane, would say, 'It's plain a plenty that God's at the head of things!'"

"Ho, and it's always plain who's at the heels of the hindermost," responded Rupert Radcliffe.

"God's mercy is a charmed circle that we may be empowered to cast between the hindermost and that evil host. And theirs is the extremity of need. They should be the children of our protection and the pensioners of our warmest compassion and richest gifts," replied Robert Lane, gravely.

"Amen!" added the minister, softly.





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